Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

Unholy Trinity
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I don't watch much television, and when I do I generally avoid the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). For many years TBN has been dominated by faith-healers, full-time fund-raisers, and self-proclaimed prophets spewing heresy. I wrote about the false gospel they proclaim and the phony miracles they pretend to do almost two decades ago in *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992. See especially chapter 12). I had my fill of charismatic televangelism while researching that book, and I can hardly bear to watch it any more.

Recently, however, while recovering from knee-replacement surgery, I decided to sample some of the current fare on TBN. From a therapeutic point of view it seemed a good choice: something more excruciating than the pain in my leg might distract me from the physical suffering of post-surgical trauma. And I suppose on that basis the strategy was effective.

But it left me outraged and frustrated—and eager to challenge the misperceptions in the minds of millions of unbelievers who see these false teachers masquerading as ministers of Christ on TBN.

I'm *outraged* at the brazen way so many false teachers twist the message of Scripture in Jesus' name. And I'm *frustrated* because I'm certain that if these charlatans were not receiving a large proportion of their financial support from sincere believers (and silent acquiescence from Christian leaders who surely know better), they would have no platform for their shenanigans. They would soon lose their core constituency and fade from the scene.

Instead, religious quacks are actually multiplying at a frightening pace. One thing I discovered to my immense displeasure is that TBN is by no means the only religious network broadcasting poisonous false doctrine around the clock. The channel lineup I receive includes at least seven other channels whose schedules are filled with false teachers and charlatans. There's The Church Channel, Daystar, GodTV, World Harvest Television (LeSEA), Total Christian Television, and several others. Some of them feature blocs of family television programing and a few fairly sound teachers who provide moments of escape from the prosperity preachers. But all of them give prominence to enormous amounts of heresy and religious claptrap—enough to make them positively dangerous. And TBN is singularly responsible for kicking that door open so wide.

The continued growth and influence of TBN is baffling for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the thick aura of lust, greed, and other kinds of moral impropriety that surrounds the whole enterprise. A long string of scandals involving notable charismatic televangelists between 1988 and 1992 should have been sufficient reason for even the most credulous viewers to scrutinize the entire industry with skepticism. First came the international spectacle of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's moral, marital, and financial collapse. That was followed closely by the revelation of Jimmy Swaggart's repeated dalliances with prostitutes. Shortly afterward, an episode of ABC's *Primetime Live* exposed clear examples of deliberate fraud on the part of three more leading charismatic televangelists. Those incidents were punctuated by a score of lesser scandals over several years' time. It is clear (or should be)—based on empirical evidence alone—that preachers promising miracles in exchange for money are not to be trusted. And for anyone who simply bothers to compare Jesus' teaching with the health-and-wealth message, it is clear that the message that currently dominates religious television is "a different gospel; which is really not another" (Galatians 1:6-7), but a damnable lie.

TBN is by far the leading perpetrator of that lie worldwide. Virtually all the network's main celebrities tell listeners that God will give them healing, wealth, and other material blessings in return for their money. On program after program people are urged to "plant a seed" by sending "the largest bill you have or the biggest check you can write" with the promise that God will miraculously make them rich in return. That same message dominates all of TBN's major fundraising drives. It's known as the "seed faith" plan, so-called by Oral Roberts, who set the pattern for most of the charismatic televangelists who have followed the trail he blazed. Paul Crouch, founder, chairman, and commander-in-chief of TBN, is one of the doctrine's staunchest defenders.

The only people who actually get rich by this scheme, of course, are the televangelists. Their people who send money get little in return but phony promises—and as a result, many of them turn away from the truth completely.

If the scheme seems reminiscent of Tetzel, that's because it is precisely the same doctrine. (Tetzel was a medieval monk whose high-pressure selling of indulgences—phony promises of forgiveness—outraged Martin Luther and touched off the Protestant Reformation.)

Like Tetzel, TBN preys on the poor and plies them with false promises. Yet what is happening daily on TBN is many times *worse* than the abuses that Luther decried because it is more widespread and more flagrant. The medium is more high-tech and the amounts bilked out of viewers' pockets are astronomically higher. (By most estimates, TBN is worth more than a billion dollars and rakes in $200 million annually. Those are direct contributions to the network, not counting millions more in donations sent directly to TBN broadcasters.) Like Tetzel on steroids, the Crouches and virtually all the key broadcasters on TBN live in garish opulence, while constantly begging their needy viewers for more money. Elderly, poor, and working-class viewers constitute TBN's primary demographic. And TBN's

fundraisers all know that. The most desperate people—"unemployed," "even though I'm in between jobs," "trying to make it; trying to survive," "broke"—are baited with false promises to give what they do not even have. Jan Crouch addresses viewers as "you little people," and suggests that they send their grocery money to TBN "to assure God's blessing."

Thus TBN devours the poor while making the charlatans rich. God cursed false prophets in the Old Testament for that very thing (Jeremiah 6:13-15). It's also one of the main reasons the Pharisees incurred Jesus' condemnation (Luke 20:46-47). It's hard to think of any sin more evil. It not only hurts people materially; it deludes them with groundless hope, deceives them with a false gospel, and thereby places their souls in eternal peril. And yet those who do it pretend they are doing the work of God.

That's not all. Almost no false prophecy, erroneous doctrine, rank superstition, or silly claim is too outlandish to receive airtime on TBN. Jan Crouch tearfully gives a fanciful account of how her pet chicken was miraculously raised from the dead. Benny Hinn trumps that claim with a bizarre prophecy that if TBN viewers will put their dead loved ones' caskets in front of television set and touch the dead person's hand to the screen, people will "be raised from the dead . . . by the *thousands."*

Ironically, one doesn't even need to be an orthodox Trinitarian in order to broadcast on the Trinity network. Bishop T. D. Jakes, well known for his rejection of the Nicene creed in favor of oneness Pentecostalism, is a staple on TBN. Benny Hinn has repeatedly attempted to revise the doctrine of the Trinity in novel ways, notoriously teaching at one point that there are nine persons in the godhead.

And yet evangelical church leaders typically show a kind of benign tolerance toward the whole enterprise. Most would never endorse it, of course. They may joke about the gaudiness of the big hair and tawdry set decorations on TBN. Ask them, and they will most likely acknowledge that the prosperity gospel is no gospel at all. Press the issue, and you will probably get them to admit that it is a dangerous form of false doctrine, totally unbiblical, and essentially anti-Christian.

Why, then, is there no large-scale effort among Bible-believing evangelicals to expose, denounce, refute, and silence these false teachers? After all, that is what Scripture commands church leaders to do when we encounter purveyors of soul-destroying substitutes for the true gospel:

The overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. For there are many rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision, who must be silenced because they are upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not

teach for the sake of sordid gain (Titus 1:7-11).
Those who remain silent in the face of such grotesque lies may in fact be partly responsible for turning people away from the truth. Consider the testimony of William Lobdell, religion reporter for the *Los Angeles Times,* who once considered himself a devout evangelical Christian, but after doing a series of investigative reports on the moral and doctrinal cesspool at TBN; then "finding that his investigative stories about faith healer Benny Hinn and televangelists Jan and Paul Crouch appear to make no difference on the reach of these ministries or the lives of their followers, he [gave] up on the beat and on religion generally."

All those who truly love Christ and care about the truth have a solemn duty to defend the truth by exposing and opposing these lies that masquerade as truth. If we fail in that duty because of indifference, apathy, or a craving for the approval of men, we are no less guilty than those who actively spread the lies.

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