

Tax-exempt? Lifestyles of the rich and religious: Lifestyles of the rich and religious

by [Jonathan L. Walton, Ph.D.](#) in the [January 29, 2008](#) issue

Representatives of five of the six ministries under investigation by Senator Charles Grassley (R., Iowa) made contact with Grassley's office by the proposed December 6 deadline, but reportedly only two organizations—those of Kenneth Copeland and Joyce Meyer—provided the financial information requested. Spokespersons for Benny Hinn asked for more time.

It is no surprise that most of those under scrutiny proclaim some variant of the prosperity gospel—the belief that material wealth is God's desire for the faithful. In these circles, luxurious lifestyles are theologically expected and socially accepted.

The main concern of Grassley, as a ranking member of the Senate Finance Committee, is whether these ministries are abusing their tax-exempt status. Recalling Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's matching Rolls Royces and air-conditioned doghouses, the senator asked evangelists Benny Hinn, Kenneth Copeland, Joyce Meyer, Creflo Dollar, Paula White and Eddie Long to provide detailed statements explaining their spending. His six individualized letters questioned excessive cash payments, multimillion-dollar mansions, private jets and a \$23,000 toilet.

Several ministries not only declined to provide financial documents but responded with righteous indignation. Their talking points centered on churches' constitutional rights. Creflo Dollar told Larry King that he would not provide the requested information because he is under no legal obligation to do so. Paula White, whose one-woman ministry reportedly raised \$39.9 million in 2006, expressed concerns about the precedent and ramifications of the inquiry. She is apprehensive about how it will impact the privacy of ministry supporters as well as the church's protection from governmental interference.

Bishop Eddie Long, the only televangelist yet to make formal contact with Grassley, described the request as “unjust” and “intrusive.” He charged that Grassley “wants to impose the will of government on our religious rights.” Lawyers for Long released a statement avowing that the senator’s request “clearly disregards the privacy protections of the church under law and appears to cross the line of constitutional guarantees for churches.”

These sudden appeals to the distinctiveness of the church’s role in society reveal something of an identity conundrum. Aside from selectively quoting the Bible in order to justify their lifestyles, televangelists have become particularly adept at latching their social identities onto the cultural mores of the business world. The argument is essentially this: if it is all right for Donald Trump to live in luxury as the CEO of his own company, how can it be problematic for those who head multimillion-dollar ministries to do so? In the eyes of supporters, what is good for “the Donald” is good for “the bishop.”

This rationale explains, in part, the purposeful corporate makeover of ecclesial identities. The title of CEO has increasingly made its way into the pulpit, and the organizational structure of the business world has come to describe church leadership among televangelist circles. For instance, Pastor Dollar describes his World Changers Church International as the “parent company” of his other ventures, which include a New York ministry location and a record company. He refers to himself as the CEO of WCCI and says that “WCCI is responsible for all the administrative support and corporate oversight of the various entities.”

In 2005, when it was revealed that Bishop Long had accepted over \$3 million in compensation from a nonprofit, tax-exempt charity that he established—compensation that included a 20-acre estate, a \$350,000 automobile and more than a million dollars in salary—Long defended his actions by stating, “We’re not just a church, we’re an international corporation.”

That is the problem. Although they often compare themselves to Fortune 500 CEOs, televangelists are not held to the same level of tax accountability. Sure, by identifying themselves with corporate bigwigs like Jack Welch, Richard Parsons and Steve Jobs, televangelists can validate to their followers the need for multimillion-dollar mansions, Lear jets and limousines. And by modeling the life of a business mogul, televangelists can align their lifestyles alongside the socially accepted excesses of corporate America. But such a strategy makes these preachers appear

somewhat disingenuous when they appeal to the constitutional protections of the church to deflect questions about profits derived from their evangelical entrepreneurialism.

Televangelists who feel the need to embrace a “captain of industry” persona to justify their exorbitant lifestyles are free to do so. Yet if what is good for the Donald is good for the bishop, televangelists should not hide behind the pulpit when Caesar comes knocking on their penthouse doors.