

Monday, December 8, 2003

# Once shamed, TV ministers now thriving

By Carolyn Tuft & Bill Smith  
KRT CAMPUS

ST. LOUIS — The end of the 1980s was a bad time for TV preachers.

One moment, men like the PTL Club's Jim Bakker and television's Jimmy Swaggart seemed bigger than life, supermen blessed with an uncanny ability to attract followers and money. The next instant, they were only men — fragile, flawed and the butt of barroom jokes and newspaper cartoons.

In many ways, it seemed like the beginning of the end for big-time TV religion. Look, the critics said: The emperors really do have no clothes.

But Americans, at least many of them, seem to have forgotten and forgiven. TV's salvation shows are still here, bigger and flashier than ever, thanks to the proliferation of the Internet and the continued spread of satellite and cable TV.

The names may have changed — Juanita Bynum, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland, Creflo Dollar, Benny Hinn, T. D. Jakes, Joyce Meyer and a dozen others have replaced Bakker, Swaggart and Oral Roberts at the top of the evangelical mountain — but the message remains virtually identical.

Believe with all your heart and soul, they tell the faithful. And give, give, give until you can't give any more.

God, they say, loves a cheerful giver.

In the late 1980s, when the sex-and-fraud scandals boiled over into America's living rooms, Joyce Meyer's little radio ministry was scarcely a blip on the evangelical radar screen.

Today, Meyer heads a ministry fast approaching \$100 million a year and is among a dozen or so evangelical superstars headlining a revived and very healthy industry.

The prosperity gospel also has been called the "name it and claim it" theology. God wants His people to prosper, evangelists like Meyer maintain. Those who follow God and give generously to



Tahnee Jones and her mother-in-law Betty Jones drove four hours from their home in Townsend, Tenn., to see Joyce Meyer at the Phillips Arena in Atlanta, Ga., in August.

his ministries can have anything — and everything — they want.

But critics, from Bible-quoting theologians to groups devoted to preserving the separation of church and state, abound. At best, they say, such a theology is a simplistic and misguided way of living. At worst, they say, it is dangerous.

Michael Scott Horton, who teaches historical theology at the Westminster Theological Seminary in Escondido, Ca., calls the message a twisted interpretation of the Bible — a "wild and wacky theology."

"Some of these people are charlatans," Horton said. "Others are honestly dedicated to one of the most abhorrent errors in religious theology."

"I often think of these folks as the religious equivalent to a combination of a National Enquirer ad and professional wrestling. It's part entertainment and very large part scam."

Sociologist William Martin of Rice University said that most people who follow TV religious leaders put so much trust in them that they want them to thrive. Martin is a professor of sociology at the university, specializing in

theology. The preachers' wealth is "confirmation of what they are preaching," Martin said.

Even J. Lee Grady, editor of Charisma & Christian Life magazine, has become alarmed at what he sees as the excesses of some TV preachers.

Grady defends the principle that if you are stingy with your money, you will lack things in life, and if you are generous, you will get things in return.

"But that doesn't mean you can treat God like a slot machine," Grady said in an interview.

Bakker, who spent five years in prison for defrauding Heritage USA investors, says he has had a change of heart about the prosperity gospel.

The same man who once told his PTL coworkers that "God wants you to be rich," now says he made a tragic mistake.

"For years, I helped propagate

an impostor, not a true gospel, another gospel," Bakker has written in his 1996 book, "I Was Wrong." "The prosperity message does not line up with the tenor of Scripture," he said. "My heart was crushed to think that I led many people astray."

*"That doesn't mean you can treat God like a slot machine."*

— J. Lee Grady, editor Charisma & Christian Life

ences on lessons in giving, she is blunt when she addresses what the critics say about seed-faith interpretation of the Bible. She says that those preachers who believe that to be poor are the ones who bring it wrong. "Why would He (God) allow all of His people poverty while all of the people that are living for God have everything?" Meyer said. "I think it's old-fashioned religious thinking."

# Marine general speaks of new 'greatest generation'

By T.A. Badger  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FREDERICKSBURG, Texas — Surrounded by a group of veterans who have come to be known as the "greatest generation," the Marines' top officer praised America's soldiers in Iraq on Sunday as being made of the same right stuff.

"Once again another 'greatest generation' has stepped forward," Gen. Michael Hagee, the commandant of the Marines, said in a ceremony at the National Museum of the Pacific War on the 62nd anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack.

"They don't want to die, but they are willing to," continued Hagee, who grew up in

this small Hill Country city. "That is true honor. You cannot buy that, and we must never ever lose that."

Later Hagee told reporters that he was confident that troop levels in Iraq were adequate, assuming that the bombings and sniper attacks that have killed dozens of U.S. soldiers since May are not sustained.

"If what we are experiencing now is a spike (in anti-American attacks), we're in good shape," he said. "But if it's a new plateau of activity ... we will have to re-evaluate."

Asked how military leaders will know if the spate of attacks is only temporary, the general said he wasn't sure, but he added, "I'm optimistic in their ability to accomplish this mission."

More than 60,000 Marines were among the first U.S. troops to be sent to fight in Iraq, but currently there are no Marine units serving there. Hagee said about 20,000 Marines will be deployed to that war zone in the spring.

As usual, dozens of World War II veterans — some of them survivors of Japan's surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941 — were sprinkled among the several hundred people who turned out for the Fredericksburg ceremony.

Pearl Harbor must be remembered so the United States forever keeps its military ready for action, Hagee said.

Boosting Sunday's attendance were many family members of soldiers now on the ground in Iraq.

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