

# Financial Integrity as an Authentic Christian Witness

Financial scandals undermine Gospel message, but safeguards can be put in place

By Michael Barrick

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*“Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us” ( Philippians 2:3-4).*

## **Introduction**

Perhaps even more than sexual sin, financial shenanigans and skullduggery by Christian church leaders in the modern era have done more to discredit the Church – and hence the Gospel – than any other sin. The believer’s faith is shaken and non-Christians see such scandals as evidence that the messages delivered from behind the pulpit – even that of Christ crucified and risen for each person’s sins – are at best suspect, and at worst nothing more than another scam to pad somebody’s pockets.

As a result, among a church’s first order of business is to ensure that safeguards are in place to prevent financial impropriety on the part of any church leader or member that has access to, or is responsible for, church finances. Of course, a pastor’s salary is but one of many expenses incurred by any church; consequently, safeguards to ensure proper accountability must also provide oversight of other costs, the entire budget and any other financial matters, including the proper and complete reporting of revenues and how they are distributed.

## **The Prevalence of Financial Impropriety**

In the course of our work at Wall Watchers, we have received countless allegations of financial misconduct by church leaders. While not all the allegations pan out to be true (thank goodness), there are indeed untold numbers of churches across the United States where suspicions of financial misconduct are well-founded and proven. Most disturbing, because of the news coverage that results from such revelations, unbelievers have their skepticism reinforced, seeing the scandals as affirmation that Christianity’s claims are false, motivated not by a concern for humankind, but rather self-enrichment.

This is of concern because it is incumbent upon Church leaders to model the characteristics of Jesus if the Gospel is to be considered authentic by a culture increasingly skeptical of the claims of Christians. His followers should therefore model a lifestyle that is consistent with Jesus’ example, especially in matters that are as

fundamental and visible as money and sacrificial living. One can not expect congregants or nonbelievers to be encouraged by the hope of the Gospel if church leaders demonstrate a lack of faith by ironically building up nest eggs for themselves rather than trusting in the Lord's provision.

## **Safeguards**

There are steps church leaders can take to ensure that the pastor and all leaders are exhibiting the sacrificial nature and servant's heart modeled by Jesus. Safeguards would include:

- Have a "board" – whether trustees, deacons, elders, bishops, denominational administrators, or some other structure established by denominational or congregational bylaws – that is diverse, independent, and where a majority of its members have no financial interest in the church or any related entities.
- Establish a compensation committee from independent board members that is charged with bringing recommendations for pastoral and other church staff salaries and perks to the full board for review and approval.
- Provide full and comprehensive disclosure regarding total pastoral and staff compensation, board relationships, income from related-party transactions, and other costs; potential conflicts of interest should also be disclosed.
- Write and implement policies for whistleblower protection and document destruction restrictions, modeled after the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, to give congregants confidence that internal safeguards are in place should financial improprieties be alleged or discovered by employees.
- Voluntarily adhere to the Seven Standards of Financial Accountability of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability (ECFA) (<http://www.ecfa.org/ContentEngine.aspx?Page=7standards>). Even though these standards apply primarily to ministries, a church can certainly apply the principles of the standards to their own situation.

## **Other Key Considerations**

### **Establish safeguards early**

Clearly, accountability is required. As is seen from the life of David (2 Samuel 11), it is best not to wait for a crisis to occur to establish accountability. A church should have structures and relationships that assure mutual accountability. Countless examples from Scripture and from our own lives remind us of our infinite ability to deceive ourselves and one another; accountability is a safeguard against such temptation.

### **Resolve conflicts biblically**

Jesus taught his followers the method for confrontation, repentance and discipline within the church (Matthew 18:15-17a). Arguably, exposing wrongdoing can, at least in the short-term, cause harm to the reputation of not only that church or congregation, but the overall Church. However, such disclosure is part of the repentance process and will help restore the pastor/church/congregation to its previous standing and demonstrate a willingness to immediately acknowledge and admit misdeeds.

### **Be strong and courageous**

Church members, too, have an obligation to report suspected wrongdoing (Ephesians 5:11). While doing so might be unpleasant, and certainly should be done prayerfully, judiciously and confidentially, Scripture does place a burden on the church member to be discerning – (Proverbs 1:5); a good steward (1 Corinthians 4:2); and, a generous and cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7). Church members, to be generous and cheerful givers, must have confidence that the church’s disclosures regarding financial practices, spending habits, governance and compensation, and other key practices are complete, thorough, timely and transparent.

### **Conclusion**

It is not possible to overstate the damage done to the cause of Christ as a result of the recent financial scandals involving church leaders. Consequently, it is essential that Christian churches and denominations set the example of integrity, efficiency and transparency. “He whose walk is blameless and who does what is righteous, who speaks the truth from his heart and has no slander on his tongue, who does his neighbor no wrong and casts no slur on his fellowman, who despises a vile man but honors those who fear the Lord, who keeps his oath even when it hurts, who lends his money without usury, and does not accept a bribe against the innocent. He who does these things will never be shaken” (Psalm 15:2-5). Considering how many churches have been “shaken” – and the damage such scandals have done to the cause of Christ – this Scripture is particularly poignant. The impact that Christian churches can have upon the culture simply by following this Scripture in this – and all areas – is immeasurable.

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