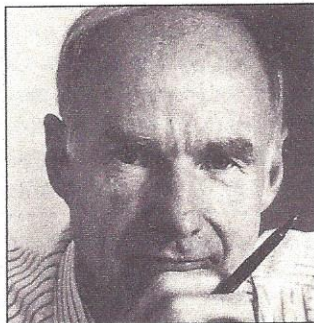


How to Deal With an Adversary

**Oral Roberts
went to Washington
and what he learned
there changed his mind, so he
“smoked the peace pipe”
with the IRS.**

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Two years ago Oral Roberts stood before the 7500 leaders at the annual Charismatic Bible Ministries conference in Tulsa and figuratively shook his fist at the Internal Revenue Service. The Oral Roberts Evangelistic Association (OREA) and Oral Roberts University (ORU) were under investigation by the IRS. For more than three years as many as seven IRS agents had been assigned to work on the Oral Roberts investigation.

“If they get me they’ll come after you next,” he told the crowd. “I’ll fight them to my last breath.”

But he didn’t fight. Instead, he did a complete about-face. In fact, he went so far as to invite a regional director of the IRS to speak at the June meeting of the Charismatic Bible Ministries—before the same group of ministers who had heard Roberts say two years before that the IRS was the mortal enemy of the church.

“I no longer see the IRS as my enemy,” he told me. “Instead I see them as God’s agent to keep us ministers—and our churches—honest.”

Viewing the IRS as “God’s agent” was a complete turnabout for the 71-year-old healing evangelist and university president. To discover what caused this radical change of spirit I traveled to Tulsa to talk to him privately. Here is what I learned.

In November of last year Roberts flew to Washington to meet with Congressman J.J. Pickle’s subcommittee of the House Ways and Means Committee, which was investigating a number of the nation’s largest parachurch ministries following the Jim Bakker/PTL scandal.

Actually, Roberts’ problems with the IRS began long before the Bakker scandal. Despite his early public vow “never to touch the gold or the glory,” the public media has constantly portrayed him as a flashy Pentecostal evangelist who played fast and loose with God’s money. Stories of expensive cars and big houses were constantly in the news—long before the Bakker scandal broke. Because of this constant attack by the press, and because of a running adversarial relationship with the IRS, he and the organization he heads had been flagged as targets for audit.

No wrongdoing has ever been found. However, following the public exposure of the gross excesses at PTL, ►

► the U.S. Congress got involved. At that time Congressman Pickle's subcommittee began their investigation of a number of prominent television ministers, starting with Oral Roberts. That committee directed the IRS to intensify its audit procedures to see if any laws were being broken—and to prosecute those who were breaking the law. (For additional information

on this, read James Guinn's column in this issue.)

The IRS, which receives its power from Congress, assigned extra agents to investigate 29 major ministries in the nation. Six were singled out for criminal investigation.

The number one target was Jim Bakker—who was indicted by a federal grand jury, along with two of

his associates, and is now awaiting trial.

Also under investigation were Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart and Pat Robertson. Those investigations continue.

Roberts, who was among the six televangelists under investigation, has been totally cleared however. The IRS found no evidence of any wrongdoing at either OREA or ORU. One of the reasons for this quick settlement of the long-standing investigation was Roberts' decision to cooperate fully with the IRS, rather than continuing to treat them as an adversary.

When I asked him why he changed his mind he gave me three reasons. As I analyzed them I realized they apply to all of us who have to deal with an adversary.

1. "I stopped listening to the counsel of the ungodly."

My mind went immediately to the words of David in Psalm 1:1:

"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly."

"My lawyers had been advising me to stay away from the IRS," Roberts said. "They told me that the IRS was my enemy, that they were 'out to get me,' that they wanted to put me out of business. They told me to make it difficult for them, that I was not to give them anything they asked for without a subpoena."

"Is that why you said what you did at the Charismatic Bible Ministries convention two years ago?" I asked.

"I was parroting my lawyers," Roberts said, shaking his head sadly.

Roberts' resistance made the IRS even more suspicious. They assigned even more agents to investigate him. Huge amounts of time and money were being spent to resist the investigation.

"Yet I kept thinking," Roberts said, "that if I could just sit down with them face to face we could settle all this. But my lawyers wouldn't let me. As a result, the matter was becoming almost unbearable."

Roberts' reasoning was simple—but logical. ►

► • “As far as I know, I’ve never knowingly broken the law.”

• “I don’t want to break the law. I want to abide by the law.”

• “If I am breaking the law I need to know it so I can change.”

• “Despite what my lawyers are telling me, I believe my adversaries are reasonable men. Some of them may even be Christians. I need to follow my heart rather than the counsel of the world.”

So Oral Roberts and his lawyers got on a plane and flew to Washington, D.C., to meet with both the congressional subcommittee and later with a roomful of IRS officials. The details of that interview are covered in the question-and-answer article with Oral Roberts that follows this story. The final results of that meeting were startling. Not only did Roberts and the IRS make quick settlement, but Roberts discovered:

• The IRS is not the enemy of the church. They feel the church plays a vital role in this nation.

• There is a vast difference between the way the IRS looks at non-profit ministries such as churches and their attitude toward individual taxpayers.

• The IRS does not want to close down any ministry. They simply want to make certain that ministries comply with IRS regulations and obey the law.

Roberts was smiling when he said, “I realized, after talking with these men, that they were the ‘conscience’ of the nation—and especially the church. They told me they simply wanted me to live the way I was telling people to live.”

Roberts took that seriously. He returned to Tulsa and instituted radical changes in the internal structure of both OREA and ORU. He also changed his own approach to a number of things. One of the things he did was order his ministry to sell the Mercedes-Benz automobiles that he and his son Richard had been driving—automobiles that had been given to the ministry for the Robertses to drive. Both men have since bought their own cars using their ►

► own money. (Oral now drives a Buick.)

“Now,” Oral says, “when I fly into some city to preach and the pastor meets me at the airport in his Rolls-Royce, I shudder. It’s not illegal for the church to furnish him a \$60,000 car—but is it right?”

“We hadn’t been doing anything illegal,” he pointed out. “But there is a difference in being legal and being right. I wanted to do the right thing—as well as the legal thing.

That’s why I chose to cooperate with the IRS rather than fight them.”

2. “I got serious with the Bible.”

Roberts has always been serious about the Bible. However, he candidly confessed that in the same way a man can lose his way in a forest because he’s surrounded by trees, so it is possible to become disoriented by circumstances. In this case, the worldly advice he was receiving obscured the direction he knew the Holy Spirit had placed in his heart.

Getting serious with the Bible meant getting serious with Matthew 5:23,24: “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift” (NIV).

Roberts didn’t say it, but I could not help but wonder if the violation of this spiritual principle had anything to do with their financial crisis. It also made me wonder if—now that he had been obedient to God and had been “reconciled”—this would mean his offering was now acceptable and God would once again bless his ministry financially.

Some might argue whether the IRS is a “brother.” However, Jesus makes it clear in subsequent passages in Matthew 5 that reconciliation is not limited to “brothers in Christ”—a term coined long after Jesus was here—but applies to our enemies as well. In fact, Jesus seemed to feel benevolently toward tax collectors in particular. ►

► In Matthew 5:39 He says specifically, "Do not resist an evil person." Matthew 5:41 is a direct reference to the Roman soldiers occupying the land of Israel at that time. A Roman soldier had the authority to force any Jew to carry his pack for one mile. Jesus said if that happens we are to "go the extra mile" as well—voluntarily and expecting no reward for our goodness.

Getting serious with the Bible also meant getting serious with Matthew 18:15: "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over."

It was this verse that finally forced Roberts to go personally to meet with his adversary—the IRS. God honored that bold, brave move on his part. The IRS cleared him and Roberts emerged with a new respect for government agencies—even calling them "the instrument of God to keep us honest."

Such is the result of getting serious with the Bible.

3. "I got serious with God."

Very few men in this century have preached and lived the provision of God as has Oral Roberts. His concept of "seed faith" has revolutionized the lives of millions. But Roberts is a human being, as well as a man of God. Like the rest of us, his faith sometimes wavers. Several years ago, when his ORU medical school was going through a financial crisis, he held an open forum on public television—discussing his problems. He admitted he did not know where the money was going to come from for scholarships to send young doctors to the mission field.

At that point his wife, Evelyn, chided him. That statement, she said, was not a statement of faith. Oral's open, spontaneous confession that his wife was right—that he had momentarily forgotten that God was his provider—gave him instant credibility in the eyes of many who wondered if his faith was real. ►

► Faith is not real unless you doubt occasionally. In Oral's case, with the IRS he returned to real faith.

"I realized my battle was not with flesh and blood," he said seriously. "God is my source and my provider. He fights my battles. I can always rely on Him in time of trouble."

Scores of Scripture passages ran through my mind as I sat there listening to him, for I was suddenly realizing these same principles he had rediscovered were the ones I should be using in my struggles against an adversary.

*Trust in the Lord and do good;
dwell in the land and enjoy safe
pasture.*

*Delight yourself in the Lord
and He will give you the desires
of your heart.*

*Commit your way to the Lord;
trust in Him and He will do this
(Ps. 37:3-5).*

I remembered Len LeSourd's favorite translation of Psalm 37:5:
Trust in the Lord and He will act.

Other Scripture verses came to mind:

*I waited patiently for the Lord;
He turned to me and heard my cry
(Ps. 40:1).*

*God is our refuge and strength,
an ever present help in trouble
(Ps. 46:1).*

Roberts was right.

As I sat listening to him describe the meeting he had with the IRS directors, the projector in my mind suddenly flicked on. On the screen I saw a wise old Indian chief (Oral is part Cherokee) going to Washington to meet with the Great White Fathers. When the meeting is over and all the problems have been resolved, the old chief pulls out the peace pipe. Then, in a solemn ceremony, the men, former adversaries but now reconciled, pass the pipe back and forth over the table as a symbol of their unity. ■