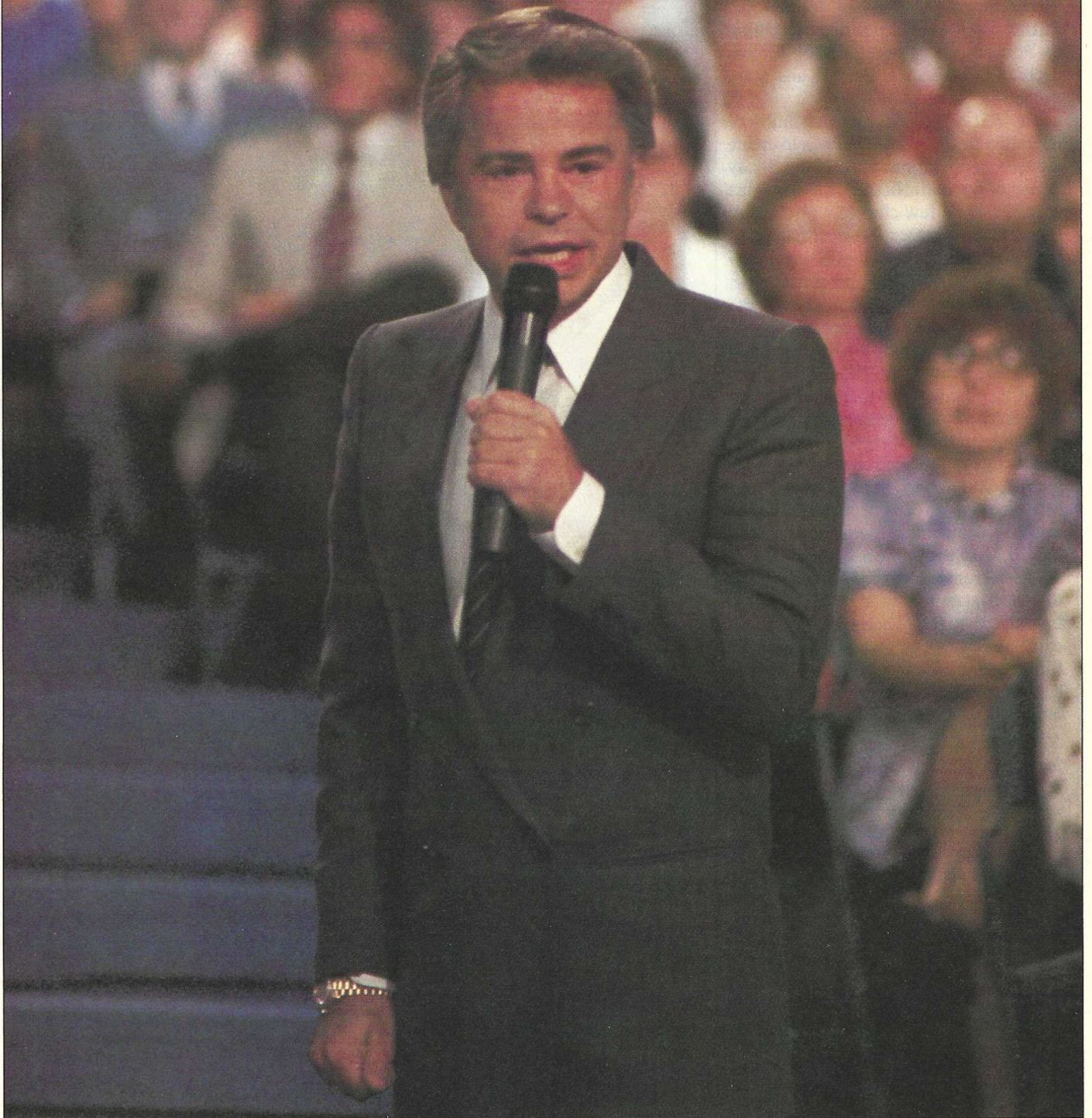


FEATURE

PTL Meets



the Press

The Charlotte Observer has accused Jim and Tammy Bakker of misusing funds and misleading viewers. Is there truth behind the headlines? Or is PTL being unfairly attacked?

By JAMIE BUCKINGHAM

Tammy Faye stands before the camera, tears running down her face, mascara streaking to her chin. "People, you just can't imagine what it costs to keep us going here at PTL."

She then reads off figures which PTL executive director Richard Dortch copies onto a blackboard. The figures, totaling \$148 million, do indeed stagger the imagination.

PTL, after a dozen years on the air in Charlotte, North Carolina—and around the world by satellite and into 13 million homes via its own cable network—is in financial trouble. Any bad publicity which causes PTL to lose credibility could damage this ministry which operates on the thin ice of monthly contributions.

"If I were the devil," a PTL vice president told me, "I would destroy this ministry by spreading lies about our integrity."

On January 27, 1986, Paul Harvey, reporting on ABC radio news, told the nation: "Broadcast evangelist Jim Bakker of the PTL Club, accused by the FCC of diverting money donated to his ministry—spending it instead on a mink coat for his wife, a sports car and a houseboat."

His information came from a UPI report which had condensed articles published by the *Charlotte Observer*. On January 26, 1986, the *Observer* had viciously attacked Bakker. Harvey later corrected his report saying the accusations were false and that UPI had apologized to Bakker, but others in the media were not as kind.

The Charlotte paper had front-paged an investigation by the Federal Communications Commission and the Justice Department which had, three years ago, dismissed charges against Jim Bakker and PTL originally brought by the paper.

Why, I wanted to know, had the

Charlotte paper reprinted the charges? This swipe at PTL was so extraordinary—a seeming frontal attack with spiritual undercurrents—that *Charisma* associate editor Steven Lawson and I made a special trip to PTL in Fort Mill, South Carolina, just outside Charlotte. Richard Dortch gave us free access to all files. He withheld nothing. We also talked with Richard Oppel, the editor of the *Observer*. Here's what we discovered.

In January 1979 the *Observer* obtained information from three former PTL vice presidents. R. Whitney "Bob" Manzano had been fired in October 1978 after working at PTL for 18 months. Bakker charged him with mishandling the missions program and with falsifying his employment application—claiming non-existent college degrees. Jim Moss, former executive vice president, had been with PTL from its humble beginnings in a furniture warehouse. In 1978, Moss's relationship with Bakker deteriorated. Just after the paper broke their story in January 1979, charging PTL with misusing mission funds to pay bills at home, Moss was fired. He later testified against Bakker in the FCC hearings. Bill Perkins, vice president for administration, was also an 18-month employee. He had joined the staff to try to straighten out PTL's financial problems. Perkins resigned in December 1978, disagreeing with Bakker's lifestyle.

In the 1979 front-page article, the paper charged that Bakker had taken \$56,000 raised for a Cyprus television project, \$150,000 designated for Brazilian TV and \$281,000 promised to Paul Yonggi Cho for Korean TV and spent it to build Heritage USA—a 2,300-acre Christian recreation park surrounding the new PTL television studios.

In subsequent articles, the paper accused Bakker of using PTL money to buy a Corvette sports car and a \$2,500 mink coat for Tammy, and to make a \$6,000

down payment on a 42-foot houseboat for his own personal use.

An informer at the *Observer* told Bakker that the editor had set a personal goal to expose PTL and had assigned a reporter to stay on the case until the ministry was destroyed. Frustrated, Bakker went on the air to defend himself and to protect his viewers from false information.

The FCC received copies of the *Observer* articles and opened an investigation. They sent into the PTL offices investigators who went through every PTL record, examined canceled checks, interrogated PTL employees (and ex-employees), looked at thousands of hours of videotape and subpoenaed Bakker and others to come to Washington, D.C., to testify.

During that time both Bill Carmichael of the *Logos Journal* and Doug Wead of *Restoration* magazine did independent studies which alleged that Arthur Ginzburg, chief of the Compliance and Complaints Division of the FCC, was working behind the scenes with Al Cowan, a reporter with the *Observer*. In an interview with Carmichael, Ginzburg refused to deny or confirm his alleged statement to PTL attorney John Midland: "It may take us awhile, but we're gonna get you in the end."

In the end the FCC did not "get" either Bakker or PTL. Instead, after five years of harassment, the investigating committee voted 4-3 to dismiss all charges. That angered the *Observer*. They editorialized under the headline "THE FCC BLEW IT" and wrote: "The FCC failed to do its job." After clearing PTL the FCC forwarded their files to the U.S. Justice Department which conducted a criminal investigation. On March 14, 1983, the case was finally closed when the chief of the criminal division declared: "The report has been carefully reviewed by the Justice Department. As

a result of our review it has been determined that, based upon underlying facts and circumstances, prosecution should be denied. Accordingly, we are closing our files in this matter.”

But it was not closed as far as *Observer* editor Richard Oppel was concerned. It was apparent to much of the public that the newspaper had created its own news by accusing Bakker and PTL of crimes which the highest investigative authority in the nation later said could not be proven. This embarrassed the paper. The editor, using the Freedom of Information Act, demanded from the FCC all the records. The files—which consisted of 4,500 pages of testimony—were made available in late 1985. Oppel assigned reporter Charles E. Shepard, a young man eager to make his mark, to reopen the entire can of worms.

Dortch learned details about Shepard's article on a Friday, January 24, two hours before the deadline for the Sunday paper. Shepard acknowledged he had held off until Bakker had finished his Friday show, not wanting Bakker to defend himself on the air before the articles were published. Dortch then called Oppel, asking him to hold the story until the paper had examined the PTL files. “Ask us any questions you want. I'm not asking you not to print your story,” Dortch told the editor, “but just look at our files first.” Oppel refused. The January 26, 1986, banner headline on page one read: **BAKKER MISLED PTL VIEWERS, FCC RECORDS SHOW.** Nine other articles over the next two days followed.

Editor Oppel said the release of FCC documents is always news no matter who it is about. He provided further insights in a personal column: “Why do we write about PTL so much? Clearly our coverage of PTL angers Jim Bakker and his associates. They complain in broadcasts and in letters that we are anti-Christian, the devil's agents and prejudiced against Pentecostals.”

Then Oppel revealed the real reason he reopened the case on the front page of his paper: to save face. “The results,” he wrote in his closing paragraph, “show that the *Observer* accurately reported information in 1979, and Jim Bakker's claims of the article's distortions were untrue. In case there was any doubt, we wanted you to know that.”

What the paper did is called yellow journalism. It printed only facts which substantiated its position, slanting each story to prove its point.

If Oppel had taken the time to look at the documents Dortch offered, he would

have found that Bakker did purchase a fur coat, a sports car and a houseboat. But money for the coat came out of Bakker's own pocket—just as I buy clothes for my wife. The car was purchased by the church as a pastor's car and cost \$8,450. A few weeks later the church gave the car to an air-conditioning contractor to satisfy an outstanding debt. The \$6,000 down payment for the houseboat was paid out of accrued money which Bakker had earlier refused to take from PTL because the ministry was in deep financial trouble. On July 14, 1978, Bakker had lowered his weekly salary to \$600 until the cash flow was in a positive position. After the crisis was over, Bakker accepted a small raise that was earlier urged by his board and he allowed the money to go for the down payment on the boat. Cancelled checks show that he made the monthly payments from his own account.

Nor did the paper report all the news on the missions money. Bakker had acted impulsively, as he often did in those early days at PTL when the ministry was growing at the rate of 7,000 percent a year. When Cho was a guest on the program Bakker blurted out that PTL would raise money to purchase TV equipment for Korea. It took Cho completely by surprise. "What could I say?" he later told me. "I was a guest on his program."

But Bakker had failed to take into account the 100 percent Korean import tax plus a hefty U.S. export tax. It took several months to work things out. Five months later, Bakker finally presented Cho a check for \$350,000. Cho refused it. He told me he had been embarrassed by the Americans who had visited his church in Seoul asking his people to see the nonexistent TV studio paid for by PTL. He asked Bakker to use the money for TV in Japan. Bakker did. Since then PTL has given \$4,122,147 for Asian TV—and a total of \$25,361,226 for all overseas missions. The newspaper never reported that.

Why is Bakker so defensive about all this? We all know today's paper is tomorrow's fishwrapper, so why not let the charges of the *Observer* die.

But it's not quite that simple. The January accusations were picked up by the wire services, condensed and horribly distorted. Paul Harvey wasn't the only one to use them. *USA Today* reprinted "Federal documents show PTL President Jim Bakker used donations to his television ministry to buy personal items like a mink coat, a sports car and a houseboat."

By the time the news reached the *Detroit Free Press* another zero had been added to the price of the mink coat and the FCC charges were reported as current.

How did PTL respond?

Naturally Bakker hit the air waves, explaining with conclusive evidence that the charges were not only six years old, but they were false. It helped. Christians by the thousands, recognizing yellow journalism, phoned PTL expressing support. Even the *Observer* admits that their mail is running 9 to 1 in favor of PTL.

The problems I unearthed at PTL have to do with differences in style—not ethics. I, for instance, have a hard time understanding this fetish many Pentecostals seem to have about gold to decorate themselves. One recent guest on the show was wearing a gold Rolex watch, as well as two gold bracelets on the same wrist. I wince over Bakker's emotive behavior on TV. I shudder at his fund-raising techniques. And I have a hard time trying to sort out the mixture of God, commercialism and entertainment at Heritage USA. Yet, all of that is really a matter of style, not morality.

As my wife pointed out, "What's wrong with having a first-class, decent family park where Christians can come at reasonable prices for wholesome fun and entertainment?" She's right. Jim and Tammy Bakker are doing a good thing. They deserve our blessing and support.

PTL has grown—and Jim Bakker has grown with it. He says he no longer makes snap decisions on the air. He says he has learned to submit to wise men. True, he's often defensive, but he lives his life in front of a TV camera and I doubt if any of us could come close to standing that kind of public scrutiny—and survive.

Soon after the *Observer* articles appeared, Mike Murdock, one of the nation's outstanding composers and singers, showed up at PTL to write a theme song for the occasion. Title: "Enough Is Enough." It's good music. "Watch out, Satan, I'm calling your bluff...enough is enough." PTL capitalized on the theme. Every place I went around Charlotte I saw black and yellow bumper stickers proclaiming "Enough Is Enough." Nobody is able to turn a lemon into lemonade better than Jim Bakker. ■

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