

Benny Hinn: 'I Would Not Do This for Money'

Evangelical Leader Under Senate Investigation Sits With 'Nightline' for Rare Interview

By DAN HARRIS

Twitter: @danbharris

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Miraculous cures for cancer and AIDS, people in wheelchairs getting up and dancing. It's business as usual for Benny Hinn, perhaps the world's most famous, successful and controversial televangelist. Hinn is a faith-healer who almost never grants interviews -- until now.

"I'll try to explain it to you," said Hinn in a wide-ranging interview with ABC's "Nightline." "The anointing, which is God's power, comes on me. ... I can actually feel it. And people start getting healed. 'From the cancer, the pain is gone. ... I was sitting on my wheelchair and I can walk now,' such things like that."

Hinn took questions about disillusioned followers and about the U.S. senator who is investigating him. The questions clearly dismayed Hinn's handlers.

He was born Toukif Benedictus Hinn to a Greek Orthodox Christian family living in Israel. As a child, he moved with his family to Canada, where he became an extremely devout evangelical. In his 20's, Hinn moved to Florida, where he married a preacher's daughter -- and then went into the family business.

Hinn said he realized early on that something extraordinary was happening.

"In fact, I was shocked, really I was, when people came up to me claiming they were healed back in the 70s," he said. "And the crowds grew. Uh to, goodness, we would have 2,000 or 3,000 show up on Monday nights. And then the word spread."

Hinn's ministry exploded. Within a few years, he was traveling the world, preaching to millions of people. In the early '90s, he started a television show, which now airs in more than 200 countries. Along the way, he has made a series of truly extraordinary claims.

In one video clip on YouTube, he said he had seen a dead man resurrected.

"Well, Ghana. It was in Akra, Ghana," Hinn explained to "Nightline." "I didn't exactly ... I had no proof he was dead. That's what they told me. They laid him on the platform, and at one point he got up. But that's not the question, the question is, can God raise the dead? Yes or no? And the answer is yes. He has. It's in the Bible, so if God did it then, why shouldn't he do it today?"

'I Would Not Do This for Money'

Benny Hinn now controls an empire. His ministry collects an estimated \$100 million a year in donations from people whom Hinn has convinced that God heals through him.

"Nightline" asked Hinn directly if he isn't taking advantage of people who are profoundly religious, and vulnerable because they're in physical pain, for his own personal enrichment.

"I'm glad you're asking," Hinn said. "Let me tell you something. I would not do this for money. If people think I would do this for money, after all the misery I've had to go through..."

"What misery?" I asked Hinn.

"Oh dear God, what misery? You name it. You're a human being like me, how would you like to be called all those names. Who wants that? What you're asking is am I using the so-called lie, that healings really happen so I can make money?"

"Of course not. You cannot fool all the people all the time, right? ... "I will tell you this. I think that if I was fooling the people over 35 years of it now, I would be caught already fooling them."

Hinn admits he doesn't have medical verification of any of the healings. In fact, some of his supposed healings have turned out not to have been real.

At a 2001 Hinn crusade, William Vandenkolk, a 9-year-old with damaged vision, claimed that his eyesight had been restored.

Vandenkolk is now 17 -- and he's still legally blind. His uncle and legal guardian, Randy Melthratter, said that after the crusade no one from the ministry followed up to see how the 9-year-old was doing.

"I said, 'Will, honey, does it still seem like your eyes are getting better? Is it getting better? Do you notice anything better at all?' And he just kind of cocked his head to the side and said 'I think God's just taking a break,'" Melthratter said. "And that just tore, that just hurt. That hurt a lot ... a little boy making excuses for God."

"I got caught up in the moment," Vandenkolk says now. "Being as young as I was, thinking this could actually be possible. ... I just started feeling sad a little upset that this really didn't happen."

Hinn was at a loss.

"These are things that I cannot explain because I am not the healer," Hinn said. "I am human like you. I make mistakes like anybody else."

Hinn's answer is that God heals people in their seats, and that he, Hinn, is not responsible for what people claim once they get onstage.

"Over the years, there's been some cases where people did come up who said they were healed, but really they were not healed," Hinn said. "I do believe it's possible for individuals to mentally convince themselves they are, but that does not deny the real healings. That doesn't dismiss the fact that a lot of people are really cured."

Hinn Ministries told "Nightline" that they set up an account in Vandenkolk's name that now holds more than \$15,000, to provide for his "education and health."

Hinn may be more confident than the team that surrounds him. Over the course of the "Nightline" interview with Hinn, his publicist started to interrupt, angrily.

The atmosphere got charged when talk turned to an ongoing probe of Hinn by U.S. Senator Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa.

Two years ago, Grassley launched an investigation into six major televangelists, including Hinn. Grassley is asking whether Hinn and his colleagues are using tax-free donations from believers to fund lavish lifestyles.

Hinn, for example, flies on a private jet and has lived in a beautiful home on the Pacific Ocean.

'Every Man of God ... Has a Nice House'

Hinn had never before granted an interview on the topic of the investigation.

He said he was "absolutely" confident that he is using the money appropriately.

In response to criticism that he leads a lavish lifestyle, Hinn said, "it's always been that by the way. That criticism is nothing new."

He flies in a private plane, stays in fancy hotels, wears nice clothes and jewelry. Does he not have any misgivings about that?

"No. Look, you know there's this idea supposedly that we preachers are supposed to walk about with sandals and ride bicycles. That's nonsense."

Jesus Christ may have lived in poverty, but Benny Hinn makes no apologies for living large.

"I mean look, every man of God that I know today has a nice house," Hinn said. "And they drive cars, and they have BlackBerrys or iPhones or whatever. It's what we need today to simply exist. ... Absolutely I need a private plane. For the ministry it's a necessity, not a luxury. ... It's a necessity for me to have my own private plane to fly so I can go and do what God called me to do around the world. If I should fly commercial I would wear out. With my schedule? It would be madness."

What is his salary? I asked.



Hinn's jet.

"I'm not gonna give you the exact amount, but it's, uh, over a half-million."

Hinn said he'd like to cut his salary to zero.

"Let me just tell you this, my aim in life is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, that's all I care about," said Hinn. "And if somebody comes along, or if there's a way where I can be completely taken care of financially, I won't let the ministry pay me a cent. I'll make you a deal. Right here on camera. Let 'em all see me do this with you. If somebody comes along and says, 'OK Benny Hinn, I'm gonna help you financially so you can pay your own bills,' or if I can do it on my own and get a job and do something on the side like I'm doing now, it would be a pleasure."

"Nightline" asked Hinn whether he ever had moments, when people are writing out checks to him or filling out cards with their credit card information, that he thinks the people can't afford it, they're doing it because they're desperate and that he shouldn't take this money.

"If I was fake I would absolutely give them back their money," said Hinn, "but I believe that God called me to preach the gospel which is very important."

Grassley's office said that Hinn has cooperated fully with the investigation into whether Hinn and other televangelist are using the tax-free donations they collect appropriately. The senator has not yet released the results of his investigation.

"The senator himself says we gave them more information than he thought we would," said Hinn. But when "Nightline" asked for the same information, Hinn said the ministry could not turn it over because "we have an agreement with the senator to keep things confidential." After the interview, Grassley's office told ABC News that Hinn is free to release any information he wants. But the ministry said it didn't have time to edit out personal information from its donors in time for "Nightline"'s broadcast. And therefore the ministry turned over nothing.

But Hinn said he was glad to get the chance to answer his skeptics.

"The questions [you] asked me, I've wanted someone to ask me for the last 20 years of my life," Hinn told me. "I think what this man did is fantastic and thank you for doing it. No, really, I'm very pleased. ... because it's time for me to tell it all. I don't want people talking for me. I want to talk for myself."

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