



## **A tragic turning point for American evangelicals: soliciting Uncle Sam to pay their salaries**

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*Disclaimer:* This article primarily focuses on evangelical churches, pastors and leaders receiving federal money to fund their payrolls.

This article recognizes that religious institutions provide many invaluable social services working with government agencies including, food, rental and utilities assistance, ESL tutoring, childcare and daycare, adoption and foster care assistance, and gym services. Religious nonprofits also operate schools, assisted living facilities or health insurance companies.

Federal assistance given to these types of services are not the same as funding the salaries of missionaries, seminary or church staff, and especially not of pastors preaching from the pulpit or religious leaders overseeing worship and music ministries, Sunday school and bible study curriculum, missions trips, Bible camps, and church planting entities.

It's important to note that these institutions are still soliciting donations/tithes while they are receiving federal money. The overwhelming majority never told their congregants/donors that they had applied for federal money, or how much they received after most of the federal loans were approved in April.

### ***Current Crisis***

For the first time in U.S. history, state governors and judges issued orders to shut down their state and local economies, only allowing some entities designated as "essential businesses" to remain open. Houses of worship and religious organizations in many states were classified as "nonessential." Some modifications were made to these terms yet severe restrictions imposed solely on houses of worship have continued even as states reopened.

Roughly a few hundred local officials and 41 governors single handedly put more than 40 million people out of work, claiming their respective state shutdowns were necessary to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. According to the Government Accountability Office (GAO), 42 million unemployment claims have been filed nationwide since March.

Congress stepped in to provide financial assistance to individuals, families and businesses impacted by state shutdowns by passing key legislation: the CARES Act, the Families First Relief Act, and the Small Business Relief Act (SBRA). The majority in Congress did not have time to read the CARES Act, but **passed it anyway.**

The final version of the bill signed by the president was released 20 minutes before the Senate voted on it, Rachel Bovard at the Conservative Partnership notes. U.S. Senators were neither

informed about any changes made to the bill, nor did they have time to read its 880 pages before they voted for it.

In the U.S. House, one lone voice of conscience stood. Rep. Thomas Massie, R-Ky., requested a recorded vote, which both Republicans and Democrats denied. Meaning, no vote was recorded for the single largest relief bill passed in the House in U.S. history.

Simply by a voice vote members of Congress passed bills that are expected to **increase** the national debt by \$1.76 trillion, and \$192 billion, respectively, according to Congressional Budget Office (**CBO**) projections. The SBRA adds \$480 billion to the total.

All told, these bills, combined with increased debt and lost revenue, will add an estimated \$5.8 trillion to the national debt, Chris Edwards, economist at the Cato Institute, **estimates**. In June, the **federal budget deficit** was \$864 billion, an amount greater than the entire federal budget deficit for the year of 2018, according to the CBO.

Congress is expected to pass another \$1 trillion stimulus package, which will add even more debt to this total. Additionally, state and local governments are **considering** a range of tax increases to offset their revenue losses, further burdening taxpayers. Meanwhile, many businesses initially forced to close in March may never reopen.

A recent GAO report reveals that since April, the U.S. Treasury Department *sent nearly \$1.4 billion worth of CARES Act stimulus payments to **DEAD people***. The U.S. Department of Labor also **estimates** that *roughly \$26 billion worth of improper unemployment insurance payments will be made* through the CARES Act/SBRA this year alone.

### ***Pastoral Relevance***

At the federal level, few pastors have condemned Congress' fiscally irresponsible practice of subjecting its citizens to unsustainable debt, eradicating the middle class, making the rich richer and the poor poorer.

At the state level, several pastors have filed **lawsuits** in **California**, Florida, Kansas, **Kentucky**, Illinois, Maine, Michigan, **Minnesota**, Mississippi, Nevada, North Carolina, Oregon, **Texas**, and Virginia. Jewish rabbis and Roman Catholic priests sued in New Jersey and New York, alleging discriminatory harassment and treatment.

Despite the **U.S. Justice Department** weighing in on a case-by-case basis, five liberal Supreme Court Justices ruled against the Constitution they swore to uphold in two separate cases brought by churches in California and Nevada.

In the most recent ruling, which denied Calvary Chapel Dayton Valley's request, Justice Samuel Alito **wrote**:

“We have a duty to defend the Constitution, and even a public health emergency does not absolve us of that responsibility. The Constitution guarantees the free exercise of religion. It says nothing about freedom to play craps or blackjack, to feed tokens into a slot machine or to engage in any other game of chance.”

Even though Justice Neil Gorsuch **argued**, “there is no world in which the Constitution permits Nevada to favor Caesars Palace over Calvary Chapel,” under a Democratic governor and five liberal Supreme Court Justices, there apparently is.

When it comes to practicing discernment in response to coronavirus hysteria, Georgia's Northlake Baptist Church pastor **Danny Jones** was brave enough to speak out about the evil forces behind the release of the virus and subsequent state government shutdowns.

Historically, evangelical pastors have been beacons of hope during times of national crisis. They have led national revivals and great awakenings, provided moral guidance, fought in battles, and led the abolitionist movement. They have also have founded orphanages, hospitals, seminaries and colleges.

One of the most influential was Baptist minister Roger Williams, a nonconforming separatist who founded the state of Rhode Island. He wrote perhaps the most **influential treatise** on government and religious liberty, which has been a cornerstone of western political philosophy for over 400 years.

Were it **not for Williams**, we might not have the First Amendment in its current form:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Prior to the Revolutionary War, colonists under British rule were required to be members of the Church of England, which was the sole established church of the colonies. Colonists were taxed to fund the salaries of only Church of England clergy, not pastors of any other denomination. This practice ended after the British were defeated.

Despite America's costly victory, eight years after independence in 1784, Patrick Henry proposed a bill to create a general 3 pence tax to establish a provision for “Teachers [Ministers] of the Christian Religion.”

James Madison opposed it, **arguing** doing so,

“will destroy that moderation and harmony which the forbearance of our laws to intermeddle with Religion has produced among its several sects. Torrents of blood have been split in the old world, by vain attempts of the secular arm, to extinguish Religious discord, by proscribing all difference in Religious opinion. Time has at length revealed the true remedy.”

Two years later, in 1786, the Virginia Assembly enacted the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom. It disestablished the Church of England from the state and guaranteed religious freedom. Thomas Jefferson **wrote**, “To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical.”

### ***Debt and Dependence***

Rather than remember their historic roots—2020 evangelical leaders held out their hands for “their share” of the federal debt money. They were all too willing to plunge themselves, their congregants, their neighbors and fellow citizens, into unsustainable debt, which if left uncorrected, will collapse the economy.

Evangelical leaders aggressively encouraged churches to enroll in a federal program initially created to solely help small businesses—to pay for pastors' and church employees' salaries—exactly what our founding fathers opposed. Christianity Today even published instructions

on **how to apply** for federal funding, as well as links to other guidelines published by self-identifying evangelical organizations.

Through the SBRA, the Small Business Administration (SBA) processed roughly \$512 billion guaranteed loans as of June 12, distributed through the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) in amounts of \$150,000 to \$10 million.

Initially, many SBA **loans** were given to multi-million dollar companies that are not small businesses. Some recipients gave back the money to the U.S. Treasury Department after public outcry. But many didn't.

The SBA recently released the names of 4.9 million PPP recipients that received at least \$3 billion as much as \$7.5 billion. This is the first batch of recipients to be released. There will be more.

Among them are 10,682 religious organizations. They primarily include Roman Catholic dioceses and churches, Baptist conventions and churches, numerous nondenominational evangelical churches, and some Jewish and Islamic entities.

Disclosures include business name and type, nonprofit information, addresses, ZIP codes, demographic data, name of lender, and number of jobs supported. Only a range of the loan amount received was released, not the actual amount: from \$150,000 to \$350,000; \$350,000 to \$1 million; \$1 million to \$2 million; \$2 million to \$5 million; and \$5 million to \$10 million.

Auditors at OpenTheBooks.com, a nonprofit organization that takes no federal money, **mapped** the largest loans. They include nearly 83,000 loans in amounts of \$1 million to \$10 million located in 13,700 zip codes across the country. Using Open The Books' free, online tool, taxpayers can find out who received federal money, and how much.

Largely through unsustainable debt, the federal government is funding the salaries (for roughly six months) of individuals whose job descriptions include preaching the gospel and creating Christian discipleship. Other job descriptions include Islamic dawah and other forms of religious proselytization.

Millions of unemployed Americans—receiving no full salaries and benefits—are burdened with paying these salaries.

“As you search the federal PPP loan portfolio, keep in mind that taxpayers will pay for most of these ‘loans’,” Adam Andrzejewski, CEO of OpenTheBooks.com, explains.

“The loans are forgivable – treated as a grant – as long as the businesses retain their employees and don't cut their paychecks,” he adds.

Historically, churches, synagogues and mosques have relied on tithes from their congregants. Now they have successfully solicited Uncle Sam, who apparently pays quite well. (And why wouldn't he—after all he is spending someone else's (the taxpayers') money.)

“Faith-based organizations are eligible to receive SBA loans regardless of whether they provide secular social services,” **the SBA said in a statement**. “No otherwise eligible organization will be disqualified from receiving a loan because of the religious nature, religious identity, or religious speech of the organization.”

Focus on the Family founder James Dobson, a member of Trump’s Evangelical Advisory Council, said on a White House call **that the James Dobson Family Institute**, which received between \$350,000 and \$1 million, “has literally been kept solvent . . . by the Paycheck Protection Plan,” according to a transcript of a phone call published by the **Freedom from Religion Foundation** (FFRF).

Dobson said on the call that in 43 years of leading faith-based ministries, he has “never asked for, nor received, one cent from the federal government.” Although he appears to have been more than willing to apply for, and receive, federal money once he was offered it.

*Can you imagine Jesus or the Apostle Paul thanking their respective Roman governors for keeping their “ministry” financially solvent?*

“We believe the SBA funds to churches are unconstitutional, and the behind-the-scenes favoritism and meetings with certain religious leaders is unethical,” Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the FFRF, said in a statement.

The FFRF also points to founding father Benjamin Franklin’s Oct. 9, 1780 letter to Dr. Richard Price about solvency. In it, Franklin wrote,

“When a religion is good, I conceive it will support itself; and when it does not support itself, and God does not take care to support it, so that its professors are oblig’d to call for help of the civil power, ‘tis a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one.”

According to the transcripts of the released calls, not a single person acknowledged that taking federal money to fund the preaching and teaching of the gospel is the opposite of what the Bible teaches. Both Old and the New Testament texts are clear: believers never took money from pagans, nor did they rely on the world.

Some evangelical organizations and pastors said they wouldn’t even consider taking federal money.

Faithwire’s Chuck Bentley **said** his organization qualified for the SBA program, but didn’t apply. “We didn’t want to borrow money; we didn’t want to have a grant that came from taxpayers,” he said. “So we just declined to do it.”

Terry Amann, pastor of Church of the Way, a nondenominational evangelical church in Des Moines, Iowa, argues that churches taking federal money represent “a tragic development” and “terrible witness saying, ‘we trust in government more than we trust in God.’”

“Churches need to be a check and balance for the government by way of prophetic voice,” Amann adds. “Taking money from the government then becomes a conflict of interest.”

Amann urges churches to give back the money to the government and “trust God, not the government for your provision.”

NCLL attorney David Gibbs says his **organization**, which advocates for religious liberty, does “not believe that there will be any major concerns because this is an extraordinary time where the government is trying to get funds to citizens through employers.”

Gibbs adds that there were no strings attached to the loans and that receiving them does not mean the government “provide[s] any control over the church’s beliefs or functions. If the government

attempted to assert any control after giving the loan, the litigation and the outcry would be significant. This position has been publicly confirmed by the SBA.”

“Most churches are viewing this as an opportunity to assist their employees and the economy in this unprecedented time in our nation’s history,” he said.

But in a recent letter to pastors, former Pennsylvania state legislator and president of the American Pastor’s Network, Sam Rohrer, **explains**: “there is no such thing as free money.”

“When government gets involved there are always strings attached,” he says. “What government allocates, government regulates.”

Rohrer explains that Section 1102 of the federal regulation was announced 30 days after implementing the SBA loan program, which provides guidance to lenders on the deferment process. It also includes a provision for the U.S. Senate to conduct hearings on the way some of this money has been distributed.

On April 23, the SBA came out with guidelines, and law firms across the country weighed in, Rohrer says. Civil penalties may include treble damages, statutory penalties, fines for false claims, and jail time.

The language states that religious institutions and recipient businesses had to *legally certify that these federal funds “were necessary for your continuance.”*

Guidance from SBA and law firms raising questions asked these groups: *would your church go out of business if you didn’t get this money?*

“If you can’t say that,” Rohrer explains, “then you are open for a possible charge of civil fraud in all of these criminal activities. These are strings that come with this ‘free’ money.”

It is hard to imagine that mega-churches undergoing multi-million dollar building project fundraisers, million dollar missions fundraisers and other activities, would “go out of business” without first asking their congregants to give money, or without cutting staff salaries, halting building projects, or taking other spending cut measures. Laid off employees would collect unemployment, including the additional \$600 weekly federal unemployment payment authorized by Congress.

Instead, congregants nationwide have told me that their church leaders never even informed them that they were applying for PPP loans. Their churches never sent out any form of communication to their congregants asking them for money to fill budget holes—or even to tell them that there were budget holes. Even after churches received the federal money, their leaders still didn’t tell their congregants how much they received.

From New Jersey to Texas to California, congregants have expressed the same sentiment: absolute shock when they hear their leaders applied for the PPP and how much they received. The repetitive questions they ask are:

“Why should I give any money to this church when it took between \$1 and \$2 million from the federal government to fund salaries for a few months? Did our leaders not tell us because they were afraid if we found out we would stop giving? Did they not think to ask us that maybe we would have given more in response to a need? Why did leadership keep asking us to donate money while all the while they were getting fully funded by the federal government?”

Isn't disclosing the amount evangelicals received a fiduciary responsibility, let alone part of financial stewardship and accountability?

### ***Regulatory and Legal Quagmire***

Again, to receive funding, "certification is a really high standard," Rohrer says.

Warnings about taking the money even came from religious groups' banks, Rohrer says, including his own—highlighting important questions for applicants to consider.

Businesses are by law a creation of the state. Churches are not. But by taking the money, churches effectively said, "We are asking for your money but don't want to be regulated by you. Not a realistic expectation," Rohrer adds.

In fact, churches are already complying by requiring attendees to RSVP to hear the gospel, limiting how many people can attend, not meeting in person at all, and imposing other restrictions.

Evangelical leaders complying with orders to avoid monetary or jail penalties appear to have forgotten how their European counterparts complied with the policies of Mussolini and Hitler in the 1930's and 1940's. It all began with similar ordinances like today's, which little by little, prohibited movement, speech and other acts of worship—and resulted in imprisonment (and death) for noncompliance.

Evangelical leaders who argue they are protected from government overreach by the First Amendment on the one hand, cannot then ignore the First Amendment by taking money from the federal government on the other hand. There are serious legal and regulatory consequences.

Churches taking federal money open themselves up to being audited, at best, and receiving criminal penalties, at worst; "that is a fact under the law," Rohrer says.

Because of an SBA rule—created by unelected bureaucrats—separation of church and state is gone.

According to the Constitution, Alison Gill, legal and policy vice president of American Atheists, told NPR,

"The government cannot directly fund inherently religious activities. [No federal or state government] can spend tax dollars on prayer, on promoting religion [or] proselytization. That directly contradicts the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. This is the most drastic attack on church-state separation we have ever seen."

But isn't this exactly what the government is doing?

Now evangelical leaders maintain it is the federal government's role—through taxpayer debt and taxes—to pay the salaries of pastors, church leaders, rabbis, priests, nuns, Islamic leaders, and all of their employees.

How does a pastor then accept this money and turn around and approach someone like Alison and expect her to listen to anything he has to say?

Since these evangelicals are happily accepting taxpayer-funded salaries and benefits, would they now be willing to forgo their tax-exempt status, which has enabled them to receive tax-free tithes, offering and donations?

Andrzejewski adds another line of questioning, “When you follow the money, it’s potentially troublesome when America’s faith-based institutions rely on government subsidies. Will the billions of dollars in government aid influence the message at the pulpit?”

### ***Biblical Imperative***

***To be clear: evangelicals using federal money to pay their salaries appear to have thrown the teachings of the New Testament out window. They have brought into question their credibility—namely their unique claim to believe in the authority of the Word of God. Worse still, they are misleading others about what the term, “evangelical” actually means through their radical departure from biblical principles and teachings that have been the bedrock of evangelicalism for centuries.***

As China Inland Mission founder and missionary Hudson Taylor famously said:

“Depend on it. God’s work done in God’s way will never lack God’s supply. He is too wise a God to frustrate His purposes for lack of funds, and He can just as easily supply them ahead of time as afterwards, and He much prefers doing so.”

Evangelicals can take comfort in obeying Jesus’s words found in the Sermon on the Mount. He said,

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? ...

“So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.” (Matthew 6:25-27; 31-33)

Jesus doesn’t say Uncle Sam “knows you that needs these things.” He says, “your heavenly Father” does.

No wonder these pastors aren’t standing up against government overreach or America’s political and spiritual atrophy—they’re on the government payroll.

The majority of the evangelical churches receiving federal money clearly state on their websites their purpose is to share the gospel and create disciples.

The gospel is the “good news” of Jesus Christ—that Jesus alone offers salvation. Through grace we are saved from our sins, from the punishment of eternal hell fire and from eternal separation from a God who created and loves us. Anyone who believes in Jesus will be saved and live with him for eternity. This is not a trite concept. This is the whole purpose of a Christian’s existence: to know God through Jesus, and to worship God forever. Sharing this good news is a matter of life and death—and it is free to all who believe.



For nonbelievers wondering what discipleship means, Jesus also explains it in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) (among other texts). He gave instructions to his followers in Mark 6:8-11 on how to preach the gospel, including not to rely on the world, but solely to rely on God.

The apostles specifically took no money from nonbelievers. They worked for their keep, and they intentionally did not place any financial burdens on believers or nonbelievers. How do we know this? They tell us throughout the New Testament.

***In 3 John 7, we learn: “It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans.”*** Commentaries point out that they received no help from the pagans not because they weren’t offered help—but because the disciples did not ask, did not want, and did not receive their help.

***Other texts communicate similar instructions: 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15; 1 Timothy 5:7,8,21.***

Again, this bears repeating—when the disciples and apostles preached the gospel they did so “for the sake of the Name” of Jesus—specifically not asking for help from pagans, “to not be dependent on anybody” and “to follow our example.” This principle is not just relevant to that particular time in history. It is still relevant today.

But apparently in 2020 America, believing in the name of Jesus isn’t enough to weather an economic storm, cut salaries, or even lay off employees and trust in God for their provision. But believing in Uncle Sam’s is.

Evangelical leaders taking federal money apparently no longer believe in what faith-based means: faith based in the God of the Bible not in the god of government.

Faith-based doesn’t mean putting their own congregants and neighbors into further debt.

Faith-based doesn’t mean that evangelicals in America should choose to fill their bellies, drive their cars and pay their mortgages—all on the taxpayers’ dime— while Christians worldwide are suffering intense persecution, being burned alive and buried alive.

### ***Seeking Righteousness***

There have been many unprecedented times in U.S. history—for every generation. How evangelicals respond during these times—and on whom they rely—is the entire point of faith. If evangelicals today won’t trust in the most powerful name and person of Jesus—in whom they claim to believe and are allegedly creating disciples of—when will they? And what kind of message does this send to their congregants and to nonbelievers?

Abraham, the father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, provides an example of a righteous man who refused to take money from a pagan government when it was offered to him.

According to Genesis 14, after the King of Salem blessed Abram for defeating his enemies, Abram gave the king a tenth of everything. Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself.”

But Abram replied,

“I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the throng of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, ‘I made Abram rich.’ I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the share that belongs to the men who went with me...” (Genesis 14: 21-24)

God reaffirmed his covenant to Abram after he rejected the king’s offer. Then he said, “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” God then told Abram that his offspring would be like the number of stars in the universe. “Abram believed the LORD and he credited it to him as righteousness.” (Gen. 15)

Perhaps if evangelicals stood for righteousness our country would not be experiencing the turmoil it is today.

Again, we can look to the Bible to understand why: “Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin condemns any people.” (Proverbs 14:34)

What remains to be seen is whether or not evangelical leaders will return the money and return to the principles of scripture they say they are committed to preaching. If not, their congregants should consider finding another church to attend. They can also ask for the tithes they gave while their church leaders were on the federal payroll—to be returned to them.

Alternatively, believers can support faith-based-in-God churches and organizations that have not, and will never, accept federal money.