

Pope Francis meets with American televangelists

by [Sarah Pulliam Bailey](#) in the [August 6, 2014](#) issue

What does it take to produce the first ever papal high five? A meeting with American televangelists, apparently.

The gesture came during a three-hour meeting of Pope Francis and Texas televangelists Kenneth Copeland and James Robison, just weeks after the pontiff met with televangelist Joel Osteen and other religious leaders.

At the June 24 meeting, Robison said he was so moved by Pope Francis's message of the gospel that he asked the translator to ask Francis for a high five. The pope obliged, raised his arm, and the two men smacked hands.

The televangelists are among some wealthier U.S. evangelicals who have recently met with Francis, who has called for a focus on the poor and a simple lifestyle for clergy. In March, the pope met with members of the Green family, the Oklahoma billionaires whose company, Hobby Lobby, recently won their challenge to President Obama's contraception coverage mandate at the Supreme Court.

Copeland and Osteen have been criticized by some as teaching "health and wealth" prosperity theology, the belief that faith can increase one's wealth. From his humble shoes to his simple Fiat, Francis has set a decidedly unextravagant example.

"The prosperity gospel seems to be fundamentally opposed to the message that Francis has been spreading. But he has shown that he's willing to meet with just about anyone," said Michael Peppard, a professor of theology at Fordham University.

"Joel Osteen seems to have a charismatic authority among a large amount of people. Maybe Francis is channeling Jesus: if you disagree with someone, meet with them."

Last year, Francis fired German "Bishop of Bling" Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst for spending \$43 million on a fancy residential complex. Copeland, meanwhile, was one of several televangelists targeted by Sen. Charles Grassley (R., Iowa) in 2007 for their lavish lifestyles.

Copeland declined to provide full information about his finances, and the investigation wrapped up in 2011 with no penalties for the pastors who did not cooperate and no definitive instances of wrongdoing found.

Copeland was unavailable for comment about his meeting with the pope, but in an address to his congregation, he played a recording from earlier this year in which Francis spoke on a smartphone camera and called on Christians to set aside their differences. Copeland led his congregation in prayer where many spoke in tongues, a common Pentecostal practice.

Robison, a Texas televangelist with Baptist roots who is not an advocate of prosperity theology, defended his friend Copeland.

“All the things I’ve seen him criticized for, I have not seen validity,” Robison said. “I don’t appreciate Christians standing back and criticizing each other.”

Robison said he was born into the Episcopal Church but didn’t have a born-again conversion until later in life—the kind of story he sees among many Protestants and Catholics. “There are a lot of evangelicals and Catholics who don’t know Christ,” he said.

In fact, Francis’s meeting may reflect a shift in emphasis within the papacy. His predecessor, Benedict XVI, regularly bemoaned the decline of Christianity in his native Germany and across Europe. In contrast, the Argentine Francis comes from a region where competition from Pentecostalism is one of the biggest challenges facing the Catholic Church, Peppard said.

As unusual as it might seem for a pope to meet with celebrity Protestant preachers, the potential awkwardness goes both ways.

While some Protestants praised Robison for going to Rome, others stressed that Protestants and Catholics have many differences on issues like the role of the Bible, saints, the status of the Virgin Mary, and the nature of salvation. “Very disappointed in you, James and Betty. Never forget the Inquisition—Never forget!” one commenter wrote on Robison’s website.

But Robison said he and Francis found common ground in caring for the poor.

“I don’t see him as presenting himself as infallible,” Robison said of Pope Francis. “He’s been to confession. He asks for prayer. He’s anxious to apologize on [behalf]

of Catholic leadership.”

Osteen’s meeting with Francis on June 4 was part of a larger gathering coordinated by the International Foundation, also known as “the Fellowship.” Osteen was joined by Utah senator Mike Lee, a Mormon; California pastor Tim Timmons; and Gayle D. Beebe, president of evangelical Westmont College.

The June 24 meeting leaned particularly toward charismatic Christianity. Other guests were Anthony Palmer, a bishop and international ecumenical officer with the independent Communion of Evangelical Episcopal Churches; Geoff Tunnicliffe, the outgoing head of the World Evangelical Alliance; and John and Carol Arnott of Catch the Fire Toronto, which grew out of a Pentecostal revival 20 years ago.

The pope also met in June with more than 50,000 Catholic charismatics in Rome, admitting he was not always comfortable with the way they prayed. Still, he knelt on stage as they prayed for him and spoke in tongues. “Where does division come from? The devil!” Francis told them. “Division comes from the devil. Flee from internal struggles, please!”

Pentecostal and charismatic Christians share much in common, such as speaking in tongues and healing. Together, they make up at least 584 million people in the world, about 9 percent of the global population and one in four Christians worldwide, according to the Pew Research Center.

And that’s probably partly why Francis extended the invitation to the U.S. pastors. Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, a veteran of Catholic-Protestant ecumenical groups and the author of *From Times Square to Timbuktu: The Post-Christian West Meets the Non-Western Church*, said Pentecostalism is growing in the Global South at three times the rate of Catholic growth, especially among the poor.

“My guess is that Francis knows this community can’t be ignored,” Granberg-Michaelson said. “Certainly, Francis would want to encourage Catholic charismatics to feel at home, as well as build ecumenical relationships with the Pentecostal community—and those reinforce one another. That’s also why what he is doing is both ecumenically creative and makes sense.” —RNS

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