

EVERYONE IS TRYING TO SELL ME SOMETHING, SO WHO CAN I TRUST

Every professional wants to work with the wealthy. That is certainly the prevailing thinking in the financial services industry. Because of this focused attention, this collective group of well-to-do people has become the target market of virtually any professional that has something to sell. The group has even been given a specific name by marketers: the “affluent market.” Many books have been written and many conferences held expressly to help advisors access this narrow, but very desirable cross-section of our population.

It should come as no surprise to anyone, then, that people of wealth are constantly bombarded with offers for “hot” new financial products, innovative planning tools, or state-of-the-art services. It is hard for them to turn around or meet someone new without hearing a sales pitch of some kind.

With this ever-constant intrusion of professionals hawking their wares, these affluent “targets” grow more and more skeptical about anyone and everyone who approaches them with another “opportunity” to improve their current situation with the latest and greatest whatever. Those financial advisors who seek to work with the wealthy will all say that the hardest part of getting a wealthy client is just getting in front of them in the first place. Out of necessity and to maintain sanity, the wealthy have made themselves extremely inaccessible.

One of the most common complaints we hear from people about past “marketing presentations” they have endured is that it seems the presenters have some private agenda or pet product to promote. The fear is that their advice might be skewed because of an obvious conflict of interest between doing what is in the client’s best interest and selling them something that is in the advisor’s best interest—be it life insurance, money management services, trust services, legal services, etc.—and it is usually a “one-size-fits-all” product. Everything else they offer to do for a client is nothing more than “window dressing” to enable them to make that sale.

In a study conducted by Russ Prince, wealthy individuals were asked how ethical they felt various advisors were in their practices. It is interesting that those who sold products were viewed as being the least ethical, while those who charged fees with no product sales were considered the most ethical. Accountants were considered the most ethical, fee-based advisors of all.

But with the merging of so many industries, we are seeing more and more accountants and attorneys who now also sell financial and investment products along with their customary professional services. The waters of objectivity are muddier than ever.

It is not that someone who sells a product or service is necessarily unethical, but they are often perceived to be. Thus this perception is an automatic strike against any advisor coming to them who is not practicing strictly

on a fee basis. There is an automatic negative slant against the objectivity of the advisor, regardless of the actual character of that person or the value of whatever they may have to sell.

Then, of course, you have advisors who are very narrow in their focus of services. They have a pet product, tool, or service they offer and that is really all they do. How this product or service might fit into an integrated, overall master plan is well beyond what such advisors offer. The “have I got the perfect product for you” pitch sounds a lot like the fictitious insurance agent who always started his conversations with, “Life insurance is the answer, now what is your question?”

I have even had an estate-planning attorney tell me, “We recommend limited partnerships to all our clients.” Oh, really—*all of them*? No matter who they are, what they have, or what they want to do? Everyone gets one? This kind of “one-trick-pony” planning is all too common, and it only feeds the perceived conflicts of interest with advisors. The wealthy person often wonders, “Am I getting customized advice or boilerplate planning?”

Whether the conflict of interest is real or perceived makes little difference. As the saying goes, “Perception is reality.” Why enter into a working relationship with an advisor you are not sure you can trust? You must find a way to evaluate if the advisor really has your best interest in mind and whether he is offering you more than just an “off-the-shelf” plan with some hidden, ulterior motive.

So, in a word, the bottom line is *trust*. How can you know who you can trust to give you objective and sound counsel in planning? How can you know the person you are meeting with shares your basic values and worldview? You are giving this person sway over what you do with millions of dollars that you have worked so hard to accumulate. Will they focus this planning in a way that reflects how you think, or will they find a way to hijack it to support *their* values instead, even though they are contradictory to yours? Are you going to work with an advisor who has a common biblical worldview and has integrated that worldview into his practice or are you going to work with an advisor who neither knows your God nor His Word basing his advice on a secular and worldly perspective?

In addition, many wealthy Christian families are never even introduced to several planning options simply because their advisors live and advise from a different point of view. The advisors may be good at what they do and have great recommendations from other clients, but because of their different worldview, they never offer to do for their clients what their clients might choose to do if they really knew all the available options.

Let me give you an example. In estate planning, most advisors will minimize charitable giving in lieu of increasing the amount going to the heirs, even though it might mean a large part of the estate will go to the government in taxes instead of worthy causes that honor Christ and expand His Kingdom. Because they do not value building God’s Kingdom as you do, Kingdom-building planning options for your wealth are never even discussed. This is not a conflict of interest as much as it is a difference in thinking—even if the advisors are Christians, they may still be thinking and counseling from a secular worldview. If it is not something the advisor values, why would he or she ever even ask you if that is what you would like to do with your wealth?

Secular advisors will always ask a different set of questions and come up with a different plan than someone who is operating from a biblical worldview—always. Look at the chart below to see a real example of how a secular firm offered a more traditional plan to a wealthy family suggesting it was superior.

Beneficiaries	Creative Plan	Traditional Plan
Kingdom	\$17 million	\$ 7 million
IRS	\$ 0	\$ 9 million
Children	\$12 million	\$13 million

Note that for the sake of giving a total of \$1 million more to their five kids, the advisors were willing to take \$10 million away from Kingdom giving and give ninety percent of that money to the IRS. For most people with a secular worldview, this might make sense, but is that the best stewardship distribution option for a Christian family seeking to see real positive Kingdom change in the world?

On more than one occasion I have had secular advisors tell me that it is irrelevant whether the money goes to charity or to the government in taxes because neither directly benefits the family. I could not disagree more. The positive impact on a family, when giving millions of dollars away to worthy Christian organizations and causes is infinitely more beneficial to a family (emotionally and spiritually) than paying that same amount to the Federal Government in unnecessary taxes, which nobody feels good about. The secular worldview focuses only on “me and mine.” If something has to go to others, then it does not really matter where it goes.¹

I would estimate that over eighty percent of Christians have made no provision for Kingdom giving. For those few who have, the amount of that giving compared to their net worth was merely a token gesture.

I am convinced it is not that these Christians are not interested in giving, it is because their secular advisors are not asking them the right questions. The fact is, an advisor with a contradictory worldview cannot ask the right questions and consequently a believer will never come to discover the right answers.

The following is a checklist of questions to ask a potential advisor to help minimize the risk of getting into a professional relationship with a planner who may not be best for you:

- 1) How many years have you been doing what you are proposing to do for us?
- 2) How many families are you currently doing advanced, estate planning for annually?
- 3) How many families have you worked with who have a net worth equal to or higher than ours?
- 4) May we talk with three families for whom you have implemented plans?
- 5) May we see a complete, written, sample plan of the work that you have done for other clients like us?
- 6) How much time do you devote to getting to know us and our situation before you start the planning?
- 7) How long will it take to go through your planning process?
- 8) Do you work with our existing advisors or will we work with you in place of our current advisors?
- 9) How much personal time will you spend with us in the planning process?
- 10) How do you get paid?

¹ For more on “Are Your Advisors Asking You the Right Questions?” see my book, *Spiritual Thoughts on Material Things*.

- 11) Is your planning process overtly Christian? Do you operate using a biblical worldview in your planning?
- 12) What has been your personal spiritual pilgrimage? Can you give me a reference of a Pastor/Elder in your church who I can ask about your involvement and level of spiritual maturity?
- 13) Will you conduct family meetings to help us communicate our plans to our heirs and help us prepare them for their inheritance?
- 14) Once the plan you design for us is implemented, what are your on-going services to help us keep the plan fully operational?
- 15) How do you handle future (life or financial) changes that will require maintenance on or modifications to our plan?

Even more important than all of these questions—even though it is the most subjective evaluation of all—listen to the Holy Spirit. If you or your spouse is not entirely at peace with moving forward in a relationship with an advisor, do not do it—even if you do not know why. Colossians 3:15 tells us, “*Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.*” That word *rule* can also be translated “be the umpire.” God gives us His peace to know when we are “safe” to go on with a plan, or takes it away when we should be telling someone or something in our lives, “No thank you!”

Let me make one final comment about conflicts of interest. We all face conflicts of interest almost every day of our lives. It is impossible, in my judgment, to be in any kind of business and avoid all potential conflicts of interest all the time. So the real issue is not so much, “Does this advisor have a conflict of interest?” but “Would this advisor do what is best for me even if it is not best for him?” You should be confident that the advisor’s personal character is solid enough that when tempted to overlook your best interest for his own, he would have little difficulty being open about it and advising what is best for you.

Highly skilled advisors who are men and women of the highest levels of personal integrity are available, but finding them can feel like searching for the proverbial “needle in a haystack.” It is a dilemma for wealthy families, but the benefits of taking the time to find the right advisors will pay huge dividends for you and your family in the long run. It is one more challenge inherent in being a good steward of the abundance God has entrusted to you.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR — E. G. “JAY” LINK

E. G. “Jay” Link has a unique combination of being an ordained minister with a Master Divinity degree in Biblical Theology and a professional Stewardship planning coach who for over 40 years has been working with very affluent Christian families to enable them to optimize their Kingdom impact with all that the Lord has entrusted to them to manage. After retiring from his personal practice, he then served for five years as Director of Taylor University’s Stewardship Planning Ministry, which he launched for them. Most recently, Jay founded the Stewardship Resource Group to serve Christian ministries, colleges, and churches to better minister to their highest capacity families. He has written six books, hundreds of articles and has provided extensive training curriculum for hundreds of professional financial and legal advisors in how to provide stewardship planning services for their clients.