

Introduction.

As part of our look at contemporary gospels I want to examine the growing phenomenon of the Celebrity Leader in the Christian community. These leaders tend to be larger than life figures and seem to operate at a different level than their congregants. They give the impression that they have unlocked secrets and discovered truths that are instantly life changing. That by emulating them their followers may also live beyond their limitations.

Years ago children read comic books with fantasy heroes who were able to overcome societal evils by the impressive array of their skills and powers. Great heroes such as Superman, Batman, Spiderman and the Hulk. Of course, if you read Superman comics you did not stoop so low as to read Batman! Eventually these heroes stepped off the pages of comics books and onto TV and Cinema screens. World Wrestling Entertainment Inc., like the its comic book predecessors, provides entertainment through wrestling which has storylines and feuds.

In the same way as children filled their playtime with fantasies of being superman or batman so the more sophisticated children of the age of the visual media identify with their heroes on the television screen. Reality TV and the paparazzi have created a new set of heroes – the celebrities.

Celebrities are not really a modern invention. The civilizations of the ancient world gave fame to their heroes and steps were taken to ensure that they were not forgotten. The hieroglyphic writings on Egyptian temples are there to ensure that the celebrity – usually a Pharaoh, remained a celebrity. What is different today is that, unlike the celebrities of old, who were usually people associated with royalty or some great religious, philosophical or industrial development for which they were honoured, celebrities today are created by the mass media which provides instant exposure and promotion which in the past took a lifetime to achieve.

The modern celebrity depends on exposure or fame. In his book, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, cultural theorist Daniel Boorstin, cynically describes a celebrity as “a person who is known for his well-knownness . . . a human pseudo-event.” This “need to be known” feeds off the voyeurism of a culture that cannot resist personal reports about their private lives, and most of all, their crises and failures. In a perverse way the media builds up individuals to the status of celebrity and benefits more from their subsequent

As one journalist put it;

“We do seem to have an insatiable appetite for photographs of celebrities doing anything and everything, from the mundane to the ridiculous to the criminal and all points in between and among. Hostility and resentment underlie many photographs of celebrities, and that probably is reflective of something in us.We worship celebrities; we want to be famous ourselves; we resent the fame of celebrities; and we want photographers to cut celebrities down to size (and, if possible, lower and smaller than that). Photographers oblige and yet our worship only increases and, by extension, so does our resentment and, by further extension, so does the outrageousness of the photographers’ tactics.

Steve Penhollow The Journal Gazette

Recently we have been shown the impending implosion of Brittany Spears with every detail of her sordid and tragic life described and photographed. When I see those reports I am saddened that this young woman has been so dehumanized by the press and the reading public, that her disintegration provides as much entertainment as her singing did in the past. The attitude seems to be that when she expires there will another celebrity to take her place.

The Christian community, instead of speaking out against this trend, has to some extent adopted it. Christians are promoted in the community as celebrities. There are “big names” that draw the crowds to conferences and are promoted by the growing Christian media. At one level this is inevitable. No doubt the Apostle Paul could pack them in – and they didn’t complain about the length of his sermons either! (Acts 20:7). We know that factions developed – today we might call them groupies or fans – in the early church as well. I suppose that 1 Corinthians 1:12 might sound like this today.

"I am of Rob Bell," and "I of Bill Hybles," and "I of Dwight Pryor," and "I of Christ."

This allegiance to one teacher or leader, often to the exclusion of others, caused division in the church at Corinth and no doubt it is not doing a great deal of good in the church today.

So that’s the problem as I see it. Now let’s look at what it does to the followers and then what it does to the leaders.

What it does to the Followers.

I am going to do something I do not usually like doing – I am going to make up a word. The word is “Celebritise”. It is going to mean to make famous and recognizable. Many Christians do this to their favourite leaders. They try to become clones of their spiritual heroes, instead of becoming who God has made them and serving in a uniquely personal way that no celebrity leader could ever attain. Instead of discovering their identity in Christ and asking what He wants of their discipleship in their unique situation, they simply copy. Now there is a good copying and there is a bad copying. I am going to teach this with both hands. On the one hand imitating what you see of Christ in a leader is a good thing. Paul told his followers that they should be imitators of him (**1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; 1 Thess 1:6;**) . However this imitation was not a slavish mimicry of Paul’s style or personality but rather an imitation of his devotion to Christ. He qualifies this in **1 Cor 11:1**.

I suspect that leaders that teach or preach in a way that saves their listeners the work of reading and study, are most likely to be popular with followers who are not prepared to invest the time and energy themselves. It’s wonderful to follow someone who will give you the ten principles of leadership or the five steps to holiness, or the three secrets to a happy marriage. By the way, you want to check that the leader you are celebritizing (there’s my word again!) practices the principles, steps and secrets that he or she is giving you – and that they know that the principles (etc.) work because they have tested them in their own lives.

On the other hand there is a bad type copying. This usually manifests itself in undue influence that the celebrity leader has in the individual’s thinking. “Well, Doodah says this, or Doodah preaches that”, becomes like a mantra every time the person speaks about Christian things. It’s a bit like the sons of Sceva the Jewish chief priest in the book of Acts. (**Acts 19:13-16**) They addressed the demonized man with the words, "In the name of Jesus, whom Paul preaches, I command you to come out." To their surprise they received a response, “"Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?" You see not even demons like second hand spirituality!

Celebritising leaders can be an abdication of the responsibility to grow through your own effort as a Christian. It encourages a passivity in the area of personal growth – you may be very busy with Christian service but be quite passive when it comes to personal learning and discipleship. Sanctification is about personal engagement for a long time – not listening to an inspiring message and leaving it at that.

What it does to Leaders

The celebrity culture dehumanises people so that they become a product, a face, an actor, a model that always performs on cue. Like a wind-up toy when the camera is rolling the celebrity performs. However, even though the personal battles of life are as much theirs as anyone else, their celebrity status means that they have to battle with the cameras rolling. How well would you deal with your problems if you knew that I would be describing your progress, or lack thereof, in next week's sermon?

This dehumanization that is an inevitable part of celebritising can be transferred from Hollywood to your local minister. Suddenly it is not safe to be human anymore. Standards are set with which a mere mortal would struggle even in the best circumstances. So the leader insulates him or herself from the congregation. The leader assumes a so-called professional stance with all the barriers of the celebrity world. Actors have publicists pastors have assistants and staff members. One of the features of the health and Wealth movement is the isolation of the celebrity leaders. Now let's be clear, the Health and Wealth movement by no means has the monopoly on this problem but the leadership model they generally use is copied by many other churches thereby perpetuating the problem.

Another form that this takes is when the Pastor's wife becomes a pastor in the same congregation. This makes the accountability to a pastorate or church council almost impossible because of the natural bond between a husband and wife.

One last form that the isolation of the celebrity leader takes is the prohibition of criticism. The Scripture that is usually used to justify this is 1 Samuel 24:6.

So he [David] said to his men, "Far be it from me because of the LORD that I should do this thing to my lord, the LORD'S anointed, to stretch out my hand against him, since he is the LORD'S anointed."

The statement, 'I will not stretch out my hand against my lord, for he is the LORD'S anointed.' Is repeated in verse 10 and then again in 1 Sam 26:11 & 16 & 23.

Then in Psalm 105:15 where is anointed in Jacob

The context in all these instances is clear, that to touch the Lord's anointed is to commit an act of physical violence against the one anointed by God. It does not refer to those who verbally attack and criticize a preacher and his or her doctrine. Now I need both hands again. On the one hand such verbal attacks may be quite wrong and sinful because they come from a rebellious or anti-authoritarian motive. On the other hand

they may be commendable and necessary (for example: Jesus criticizing the Pharisees in **Matthew 23**, Paul criticizing Peter in **Galatians 2:14-21**, Paul versus the Judaizers in **Galatians 5:12**, **Philippians 3:2**, etc.) but none of these are covered by the idea "Touch not the Lord's anointed." Someone who is truly anointed by God will have the grace to listen to criticism and to take to heart the things which are true in the criticism. Being able to accept correction is a sign of spiritual maturity.

Conclusion and Application.

There is a relationship between people who abdicate their responsibility to grow as Christians and the rise unhealthy leadership models. The ideal sermon or teaching event is one in which both the preacher and the audience search the Scriptures and their own hearts to integrate word and action. It is a co-operative effort in which the learning process is a two way street. Ideally leaders grow with their congregations.

When this is lost it has an adverse effect on both the leader and those being led.

1 Peter 5:2-4 (NIV)

- 2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve;
- 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.
- 4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.