

Follow Jesus, Not Superstar Christians

It is one of the strengths of our American culture that we know how to make everything bigger and better. It is one of the weaknesses of the American church that we apply this same mentality to our pastors and leaders. We know how to turn servants into superstars!

How foreign this is to the New Testament mindset, where being a top leader meant persecution more than popularity and rejection more than recognition. In the early church, as a senior leader, you were more likely to be executed than exalted. Today, ministry is the path to stardom and success. How did we fall so far?

It is one thing to have a platform that reaches millions. We can be thankful to God for that.

It is another thing to become a celebrity Christian.

It is one thing to pastor a massive mega-congregation. That is a sacred entrustment.

It is another thing to cultivate the adoration and adulation of your people as if you yourself were a superstar. Careful! God will not share His glory with another.

Superstar leaders thrive on admiration and find identity in their celebrity status. They want to be seen and celebrated. They consider themselves special, a cut above the rest.

Their image is carefully cultivated—first by themselves, then by their team—as the fawning crowds are reminded, “You are privileged to have such a man (or woman) of God in your midst!”

(The moment I finished the first draft of this article, I spotted this comment on YouTube, posted in response to my video on the same subject of the end of celebrity Christianity: “Thank you for this, Dr. Brown! I visited a church that played a five-minute video of church members speaking glowingly of the pastor before he came out to give his sermon. I was so shocked and disturbed. May Lord Jesus get the glory!!”)

Superstar leaders often travel with a large entourage, not because all the staff members are needed for purposes of security or ministry service but because the leaders are big shots, as untouchable as they are unaccountable. Is this not a blatant form of idolatry?

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Who among us could remain Christlike and humble in a setting like that? And how much easier it is to stay low when you are thrown into prison after preaching rather than hailed as God’s gift to the world and viewed adoringly on massive video screens. Fame comes with a price.

As I write these words, though, I do not have a specific person in mind, other than preaching first and foremost to the man in the mirror. Instead, I am speaking about a mindset and culture that produces celebrity ministers. This is as unscriptural as it is dangerous. In the words of Karla Dial, editor-in-chief of , we were made to give worship, not receive it.

As I wrote in 1991 in “Whatever Happened to the Power of God”:

Personal ambition must be slaughtered on the altar. The superstar mentality of the “anointed elite” must be violently nailed to the cross. The only way up is down, and before we can stand and speak in public we must lay prostrate on our faces in private.

Frank Bartleman, the pastor and journalist who helped spread the word about Azusa Street, put it like this:

The fact is when a man gets to the place where he really loves obscurity, where he does not care to preach, and where he would rather sit in the back [pew] than on the platform, then God can lift him up and use him, and not very much before.

Today, the idea of “loving obscurity” seems outdated and outmoded. Instead, self-promotion is the name of the game. “All eyes on me!” is the spirit of the age, and it has infested and infected the Body.

The Scottish evangelist James Alexander Stewart said:

I was once told that I would never be a very popular evangelist because I did not sufficiently “sell my personality.” Oh, the shame! Our business is to magnify the Christ of God and not to fling about our personalities. Dr. Herbert Lockyer, in pointing out the peril of man-worship in evangelism, says, “If a man is somewhat attractive, blessed with a fascinating personality and with power to influence multitudes, that man is often sought after rather than the Master.”

What an insult this is to our master, who knows how wretched we are outside of His grace. And what a perversion of reality. The best of us—the most anointed, the most gifted—are the servants of all, fully recognizing that He alone is everything and we in ourselves are nothing.

This does not mean, of course, that we should disdain or denigrate godly leaders. To the contrary, we should show honor to those who serve, as the Word encourages us to do (see, for example, Romans 13:7, Hebrews 13:17). And by all means, we should appreciate those who labor among us. I can tell you

personally how much easier it is to minister in places where people receive you with open arms.

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But under no circumstances should believers exalt their spiritual leaders. We are flesh and blood like everyone else, fallen human beings who have been rescued and transformed by an amazing Savior.

This is well illustrated by the story told about the donkey on whose back Jesus rode into Jerusalem. As the animal came back to the stalls, he was walking with a bit of a strut, causing the other donkeys to wonder what got into him.

He said, "Didn't you hear all those people shouting 'Hosanna' as I entered the city?"

They replied to him, "They weren't praising you. They were praising the man on your back!"

Enough said.

As for those of us who are leaders or who influence large numbers of people, let us guard our hearts carefully, lest we crave the applause and recognition and lest we hunger after the prosperity and power. As Jesus warned, "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (Luke 14:11, NIV).

Perhaps Paul could teach us something here too? He wrote, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world" (Gal. 6:14).

Today, when the church of America is being shaken and the refiner's fire is purging God's people, we must learn to embrace the cross, putting to death the craving for celebrity

status. And we must make every effort to point all eyes to the only one worthy of adoration and praise. Anything less than that is spiritual insanity, if not spiritual suicide.

If ever there were a time to get this right, it is now, as the Lord Himself is saying, "Enough!"

God Almighty is purifying His bride, and that means the end of celebrity Christianity. May it never rise again!

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