

Steve Hill: End the Celebrity Syndrome in the Church

There is a disease sweeping through the body of Christ. It's an infectious sickness I call "the man of God syndrome" or "the celebrity syndrome." It rears its ugly head in the form of self-adulation and self-promotion. Thankfully, the Bible offers the antidote.

In our politically minded, vote-conscious world, we think we are in control of who gets raised up. But the Bible says the opposite: "Exaltation comes neither from the east nor from the west nor from the south. But God is the Judge: He puts down one, and exalts another" (Ps. 75:6-7, NKJV).

In Daniel 2:21 we read, "And He changes the times and the seasons; He removes kings and raises up kings." God is plainly telling us we are not in charge!

What does this have to do with the man-of-God syndrome? Everything.

A "syndrome" is a group of symptoms that characterize a particular abnormality. The man-of-God syndrome describes people who "think more highly than they ought" of their positions in the body of Christ.

These arrogant individuals are enamored by their perceived value. Unlike Jesus who made Himself of no reputation, they spend their lives making sure everyone knows their reputation.

This deadly disease affects the body of Christ worldwide. It's in every congregation, denomination and church movement around the planet. Leaders are stuck on themselves.

Here's a word of caution to my fellow clergy. If you're a minister who's rising in prominence and you begin to feel as

if you're somebody, get on your face before the Lord. Weep tears of repentance and say to the Lord: "Naked I came into this world and naked I will return. Anything I have or have accomplished is because You have given me breath" (see Job 1:21).

Remember Herod's fate when he began believing the praise of the crowd? He died and was eaten by worms (see Acts 12:20-23). I'd rather be a worm than be eaten by them.

You see, it's not by heredity. It's not by the orders of men. It's not by politics and elections. It's not by natural succession. Nor is it by conquest and war that we get elevated in life. It's by God.

Celebrity Mind-Set

When individuals infected with the deadly celebrity syndrome enter a room, they expect others to recognize their presence and pay homage. They desire front-row or platform seats and are visibly disturbed when not given the red-carpet treatment they desire.

They feel they must speak even when not called upon simply because they believe everyone present will live in the dark without their superior knowledge. These individuals have risen above doing menial tasks around the church such as cleaning toilets, picking up garbage and tending infants in the nursery. They no longer stoop that low because now they are "somebody."

They even find it beneath themselves to spend time with a church member who is not at their socio-economic or spiritual level. The sad truth is, they avoid the very people who have elevated them to their position in the ministry.

Leaders who have been infected with this disease no longer associate with common, ordinary people. They claim: "Time just doesn't permit me to spend time with you. I'm so busy." But

they seem to have plenty of time to rub shoulders, play golf and sip tea with a more prestigious crowd.

Ministers with this syndrome no longer spend time in the foyer shaking hands with congregants. They claim the church has gotten too large. Yet they have time to shake hands and dine with the elite. I call these people “white-collar clergy.”

I’m not attempting to sway the mass of ministers who, in their own minds, have risen to such high levels. They would attack me with Scripture and vilify me for speaking against their “well-deserved” positions. I’d rather spend my time preventing the present generation from going down that path.

Young men and women who desire to enter the ministry are witnessing a warped concept of true ministry. And many outside the church have become repulsed by today’s Christian leaders.

Stuck on Self

The world is waiting for men and women of God who are more concerned about how they appear to Christ than how they appear to the crowd. People are longing to find leaders who are stuck on helping sinners rather than stuck on helping self. They are fed up with our slick self-promotion; glitzy, eye-popping Internet, TV and radio spots; and high-gloss, self-exalting magazine, newspaper and poster ads that elevate man rather than exalt Jesus.

Some leaders have gone so far as to hire Hollywood ad agencies and secular image consultants so they’ll appear one notch above other ministers. Of course there’s nothing wrong with advertising an evangelistic meeting, a ministry or a church. But many have gone too far.

The church of Jesus Christ needs to send this self-promotion back to where it was birthed—in the cesspool of hell. Wasn’t Lucifer the first being who became full of himself and decided he should be promoted?

The next generation of believers needs shepherds who have a “servant syndrome” not a “serve-me syndrome.”

I’m not speaking only of clergy. If you serve in the church in any way—as a Sunday school teacher, deacon, choir member or children’s worker—then this message should speak volumes to you.

Why? Because the same self-promoting spirit that grips those in ministry can put a stranglehold on good, God-fearing churchgoers. The same idolizing, self-adulating spirit that has invaded the lives of so many who make ministry their career can find its way into your life too.

What can you do to avoid this deception? Here’s what Jesus had to say on the subject.

The higher you rise in popularity, the greater your position as a servant. We’re all familiar with the story found in Mark 9:35-37: “And He [Jesus] sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all.’ Then He took a little child and set him in the midst of them. And when He had taken him in His arms, He said to them, ‘Whoever receives one of these little children in My name receives Me; and whoever receives Me, receives not Me but Him who sent Me.’”

Before Jesus humbly blessed this child, He had already performed incredible miracles. He healed the woman with the issue of blood, experienced the transfiguration, raised Lazarus from the dead and fed the 5,000. Yet after all that, what did He tell His disciples? “If you want to be first, you’ve got to be last. You must be a servant of all.”

The higher you rise in popularity, the greater your position as a servant. That concept is hard to grasp in our Western culture because we’re known for climbing the ladder of success. Secular bookstores are flooded with manuals on how to rise above the person in front of you, which is the exact

opposite of what Jesus taught.

Jesus' prescription for this deadly syndrome is, "Whatever great things you do, always remember you're a servant." Let's keep in mind that one of the last acts of this miracle worker was washing the disciples' feet. The higher He rose in popularity, the greater His position as a servant.

A person who wants to be involved in the lives of men must first become intimate with God. We do that by spending time in our prayer closets repenting of our sins and getting to know Him.

Psalm 51 shows us the way. "Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me hear joy and gladness, that the bones You have broken may rejoice.

"Hide Your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me by Your generous Spirit" (vv. 7-12).

Hyssop was a plant used for medicinal purposes and for cleansing. Here's the clincher. After you get right with God and are cleansed, after you become intimate with the Lord, something happens:

"Then I will teach transgressors Your ways; and sinners shall be converted to You" (v. 13). This is so clear. But too often people get the cart before the horse. If you want to be positioned in the ministry, if you want to be useful on earth, let me tell you how: Get in a place of intimacy with God.

Jesus, in the middle of His glorious, crowd-mesmerizing ministry, maintained intimacy with God.

What does this have to do with church life? Everything. Church members, singers, musicians, altar workers, children's workers, future staff members—whatever you're after, this is the road you must travel.

The amount of anointing you possess should never dictate how approachable you are. I've chosen not to model my life on the lives of modern-day pastors or evangelists. Although there have been great men and women of God in the past and there are many alive today, it is safer for us to pattern ourselves after Jesus. Jesus was mightily anointed, yet He allowed everyone to approach Him: children, people who had questions, people who had given up hope, people who made emotional pleas for help, people who wanted to follow Him. And He didn't send His thugs to get rid of them.

You know the story of blind Bartimaeus in Mark 10. He wanted a touch from God and screamed out, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" What did Jesus do? Did He say: "Get rid of him. Get him out of here"? No! He said, "Call him here." My friend, that's how Jesus operated. With His great anointing He was still approachable.

A person who is positioned in the ministry by God will be persecuted by others. You might as well accept it. If you're positioned by God, you will go through persecution. In fact, if you're not being persecuted, something is wrong.

Throughout the Word you will see this pattern. The Bible says they will revile or defame you. They'll speak evil of you, hate you and persecute you for righteousness' sake. Perhaps the reason we are not persecuted today is because we're not preaching the Word.

Are you standing for truth? Jesus sent His disciples into homes and said, "If they reject My Word, leave and wipe the dust from your feet" (see Matt. 10:14).

Ministers today go into the homes of millions through

television. Rather than being rejected they are received. Rather than removing the dust from their feet, they are raking in donations from their followings.

I wonder what would happen if our words carried a little more weight! The Bible says all who live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (see 2 Tim. 3:12).

A person who is popular with the crowd should never pollute his message. This is another antidote to the celebrity syndrome. You never compromise the message, no matter how large the crowd.

Jesus was popular with the crowd. But when He told them to eat His flesh and drink His blood, many said, "This is too difficult for us," and they turned and walked away (see John 6).

What was Jesus' response? He didn't flinch, change His message or run after the offended crowd. Instead, He turned to His disciples and said, "How about you, boys?" They responded, "You have the words of eternal life."

So He told them: "All right. If you're with Me, you're with Me. Now follow Me." Jesus is not going to change His message for anybody. We must live—and preach—to please God rather than man.

According to Jesus, a person who wants a ministry of mighty things must be willing to do menial things. Menial things are insignificant things that are done in secret when no one is shining a spotlight on you. You're just busy doing something for the Lord.

Jesus spent His life serving. He washed His disciples' feet. He cooked them breakfast after the resurrection. Jesus served.

If you want to achieve success and climb to a place of great elevation in the Lord, then look down. Don't pass up the

insignificant tasks, especially those that nobody but God can see.

There's a new generation coming up, and I'm going after them. I want to raise up men and women who will get their model for life and ministry from the Word of God and the life of Jesus.

Their modus operandi will be to serve rather than be served, and their lives and ministries will be characterized by holiness, humility and a heartfelt love for people. I pray that God uses them in greater ways than He has used any other minister who has graced this planet—and that He preserves them from the deadly man-of-God syndrome.

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