

Never Build a Ministry on One Man's Swag

John the Baptist said he was not worthy to untie Jesus' lowly sandals. But in today's hyper-cool, megachurch culture, a preacher's footwear has become very pricey.

So pricey, in fact, that a new Instagram account called *preachersnsneakers* went viral last month and now has 154,000 followers. The social media account does nothing except offer photos of famous preachers' expensive and colorful footwear—including a pair of red Air Yeezy 2s worn by South Carolina pastor John Gray. His shoes retail for \$5,611.

Some people have complained about the Instagram site, claiming that its founder, an anonymous guy named "Tyler," is hurting the church. But he says he's simply holding up a mirror and asking Christians if our leaders should be known for their lavish tastes in clothes.

There's really nothing new about this. In the 1980s, televangelists were criticized for their three-piece suits and pricey Italian leather dress shoes—yet we know their followers gave them enough money to buy them private jets. Today, the suits and leather shoes are out of date, but the price tag on the designer sneakers is the same.

In today's vocabulary, it's called swag. It basically means stylish confidence, and it comes from the word "swagger."

Like the televangelist of the old days, the celebrity preacher of today may still be on television—or he may have his own YouTube channel. But his look has been totally updated. His hairstyle is hip, he has a few days' stubble on his face and his ministry has an app for your smartphone.

And apparently his on-stage wardrobe must now include a pair

of \$1,000 Air Jordans.

I'm not against hair gel, stubble or the latest designer athletic shoes. I enjoy some of these preachers' podcasts. And, in their defense, some of these men received their fancy footwear as gifts from wealthy donors.

But I am concerned about the swag factor. Technology and youthful trendiness can breed pride if we're not careful. And pride is still pride, whether it is clothed in yesterday's neon polyester or today's jeans.

As ministry platforms grow larger, the potential for bigger egos grows more dangerous. Let's all take the humility test. We need less swag and more brokenness in the pulpit. Let's remember these basic biblical principles as we choose who to follow:

1. Christians should never worship preachers. Paul rebuked the people of Lystra when they called him and his companion Barnabas gods. Paul told the people: "We are also men of the same nature as you" (Acts 14:15b, NASB). True ministers of God will not allow their followers to place them on pedestals. Paul knew his proper role was to take the lowest seat, as a bondservant of Christ Jesus (see Phil. 1:1). He also knew that ministers must never allow flattery or adoration to inflate their egos.
2. Preachers must know who they are and who they aren't. When people spread a rumor that John the Baptist was the Messiah, he corrected them and said: "I am not the Christ. ... He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:28, 30, MEV). Even some of the most gifted Christian communicators can be seduced by the power of technology—and by the roar of a crowd—so that they actually believe they are in an elite category. No! We are nothing and He is everything. We must get out of the way so people can see Jesus!

Leaders who have not crucified the lust for self-promotion can become infatuated with the big and the sensational. They can build big churches with bigger projection screens, yet their character cannot sustain the pressure of spiritual warfare that inevitably comes. An out-of-control ego becomes a monster.

Author Henry Blackaby said it this way: "Nothing is more pathetic than having a small character in a big assignment. Many of us don't want to give attention to our character; we just want the big assignment from God."

3. Ministry is best accomplished with a team, not a celebrity. Paul laid the foundations of the church in the Gentile world, but he always shared the spotlight with Timothy, Silas, Barnabas, Titus, Phoebe, Priscilla and other co-workers—who suffered in prison with him and faithfully preached alongside him. He didn't try to be five places at once; he trained people to take his place. And nobody on the team had swag!

It is becoming popular for large churches to open satellite campuses that offer video sermons from the same preacher. If this strategy is effectively reaching more converts, that's great. If preachers can do that and stay humble, keep it up. But let's be careful that we are not building ministry on one man's charisma.

Our ultimate goal should be for a whole new generation of people to be trained and empowered to serve, not for one man to build a show around his gift. And certainly not around his expensive Air Jordans.