

Please Don't Worship the iPreacher

Let's be careful of building a ministry on one man's charisma—even if he is trendy

Thanks to amazing advancements in digital technology, pastors today can reach massive audiences. Their sermons can become overnight YouTube sensations. Some of our most gifted Christian communicators touch millions through their downloadable sermons. Others broadcast their messages to multi-site locations so that their reach is multiplied to 10 or 20 congregations instead of one.

I'm not complaining about this. I love the fact that this column (which started out as a page in a paper magazine) is now able to travel to the other side of the world in seconds. I'm glad I can preach the gospel through Twitter and Facebook. God wants us to use modern technology.

But as much as I love my iPad, and as much as I welcome all the rapid changes occurring in communications, I'm concerned about the emergence of the iPreacher.

The iPreacher is not a new phenomenon. In another era he (or she) would have been called a televangelist. But televangelists today are considered as outdated as three-piece suits and Brylcreem. Today's celebrated communicator may still be on television, but his design is updated. His hairstyle is cool, he has a few days' stubble on his face and his ministry has an app for your smartphone.

Please hear me. I'm not against hair gel, stubble or the latest app. Yet new technology and youthful trendiness can breed pride if we're not careful. And pride is still pride, whether it is clothed in yesterday's polyester or today's distressed denim. Just as the most popular televangelists

failed morally in the 1980s, we are bound to see today's iPreachers fall if we repeat the mistakes of the past.

In Orlando, Fla., where I live, the popular young pastor of a 5,000-member church resigned a few weeks ago after he admitted to an affair with a church staff member. The church had grown rapidly in recent years, and the pastor's sermons were broadcast in five locations. Yet when the scandal broke, parishioners learned that the pastor's wife had accused her husband of being drunk and out of control at one point.

How does this happen? How can a minister of God with enough talent to attract big crowds to five locations live a double life of adultery? Proverbs 16:18 offers one possible answer: "Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before stumbling" (NASB). The Message Bible translates it this way: "First pride, then the crash—the bigger the ego, the harder the fall."

As technology continues to advance, and as ministry platforms grow larger, the potential for bigger egos grows more dangerous. So let's remember these basic biblical principles:

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 14:15, 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 "bond-servant of Christ Jesus" (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). 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. The result is disaster. 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.

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. The 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.

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