

# Celebrities, Charlatans and the Kingdom of God

By Bill Muehlenberg, May 26, 2008

It is both an amazing and a humbling truth that God has for some reason decided that his work in this world would largely be carried out by you and me. He has said that we his people will help to build his Kingdom. Despite our fallen, frail and fickle natures, he has wondrously and mysteriously chosen us to help get the job done.

That is an incredible thought. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 4:7, we have this treasure (the glory of God) in earthen vessels (our own weak and stumbling selves). Imagine the humility and grace of God, to entrust this most vital of tasks to us.

It is almost as if I had a multi-million dollar business deal to stitch together, and I entrusted the whole job to a five-year-old boy. Or as if I must sit a rigorous PhD entrance exam, and I ask a four-year-old girl to take it for me. Or as if I choose to entrust the flying of a 747 to a three-year-old boy.

Of course we have many promises that God will achieve his purposes, and his Kingdom will be established. "I will build my church" Jesus reassured us (Matt. 16:18). Indeed, the gates of hell will not prevail against it. That which God has started he will bring to completion (Phil. 1:6). Many other such promises and assurances could be cited here.

Yet despite these glorious promises, it is still mind-boggling to know that somehow we are involved in all this. He still deigns to use us to help achieve the tasks of world evangelisation, disciple-making, and church building. Given how many Christian leaders have failed so greatly, and how many pastors have fallen from grace, it is a wonder that the church is being built at all. Indeed, we have all seriously harmed the church and brought dishonour and disrepute to God by sin, selfishness and failure. We have failed him time and time again. It is incredible that God still continues to use us.

A recent article in *Charisma* magazine speaks to one aspect of all this. It speaks of the "deadly virus of celebrity Christianity" and is well worth having a look at. (It does not yet appear to be in the *Charisma* website.) J. Lee Grady, the author, reminds us that we have strayed quite a way from the early church, as we engage in "shameful carnality".

He begins with these words: "Some bigheaded preachers demand rock star treatment. If the apostle Paul were around today he might throw rocks at them. Just when I thought we had finally taken enough abuse from the egomaniac ministers in our midst, I've learned that some of our leaders are taking things to a new extreme. We've moved beyond the red carpets, limousines and entourages of the 1990s. A new strain of the celebrity virus is spreading in large segments of the church."

He provides several examples of this. One really takes the cake: "One friend of mine in Texas recently inquired to see if a prominent preacher could speak at her conference. The minister's assistant faxed back a list of requirements that had to be met in order to book a speaking engagement. The demands included:

- a five-figure honorarium
- a \$10,000 gasoline deposit for the private plane
- a manicurist and hairstylist for the speaker
- a suite in a five-star hotel

-a luxury car from the airport to the hotel  
-room-temperature Perrier”

The apostle Paul would be rolling in his grave if he heard of such foolishness. Indeed, as Grady rightly comments, “This really makes me wonder how the apostle Paul, Timothy or Priscilla managed ministering to so many people in Ephesus, Corinth and Thessalonica. How did they survive without a manicurist if they broke a nail while laying hands on the sick?”

Jesus, Paul and others warned about the trap of riches, and the temptation to turn the gospel into something for mere financial gain. Yet it seems now that some pastors are even charging for pastoral visits, or a bit of pastoral counsel. Grady provides this example:

“In a city in the South, a well-known preacher is known to ask for money in order to secure a five- or 10-minute counselling session. The minister uses Proverbs 18:16, ‘A man’s gift makes room for him and brings him before great men’ (NASB), to support this bizarre practice. Some people are known to give more than \$1,000 for a short meeting.”

Grady comments, “People on fixed incomes need not apply. (That would include lepers, blind beggars, Samaritan women or any other social outcasts who were welcomed and healed by Jesus without payment.)”

Quite right. We live in the age of the celebrity pastor, and these pastors have a lifestyle to match their status. Yet our Lord had nowhere to rest his head. He owned no home, had no wealth, and did not even have a pension plan. Nor did the early disciples.

But today we have made a prosperity gospel out of what should be a gospel that sets sinners free and makes us right with God. Today we have no heroes, only celebrities, as David Wells reminds us in his important new book (which I will soon review here).

The Christian church has also fallen for the celebrity trap and the fame game. We are more interested in mega-pastors and megachurches than we are in the two most important things of the Christian faith: the person and work of Jesus, and the inspired Word of God.

Indeed, in one best-selling book by the pastor of America’s biggest church, words such as sin, the cross, judgment, atonement, hell and self-denial are not even mentioned. It is all about us, and what benefits we believers can get. Jesus is in fact rarely mentioned in this book, and God does not get much more attention. (This book I will also soon review here.)

We live in an age of entertainment, of celebrities, of greed, of pleasure, of vanity, of self, and of self-indulgence. And much of the church of Jesus Christ has pretty much taken all this on board. No wonder we are so anaemic, so ineffective, so despised and rejected by the world. We have nothing to offer.

The world has all these things already. Why get them second-hand from the church? It is only when the church is radically different, and preaches a real gospel, that we will turn the world upside down. Only when we get back to Jesus Christ and him crucified will we be real salt and light. Only when we renounce our worldliness and shallowness and carnality will we see real revival break out.

The question is, what do we as God’s people most want? Do we simply want to be like the world, or do we want to challenge the world, to show the world something much better, and be true to Jesus Christ? The world rejected Jesus. It put him on a cross. We should expect no less as his flowerers.

But if we insist on being like the world and copying the world, we will not be rejected, much less crucified. We will simply be laughed at, or ignored. We certainly will not be taken seriously. Now is the time to decide whose side we are really on. "Choose you this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15).