

THE INFLUENCE OF SYMBOLIC LEADERS

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Back in 1999 an anonymous high school student wrote these words about the identity of his personal hero: “My hero is Jesus Christ. He was born in a poor family, spent most of his life as a carpenter, and was an itinerant preacher for just over 3 years; yet the influence He has had on the human population is tremendous; no other person has had such an influence. Today, after about 2000 years, His followers are still willing to be persecuted and martyred in different parts of the world” (www.ecu.umd.edu).

After reading this I started to think about how high school students might answer the question about who their hero is today. In a pole of 12 students, certainly not scientific, not one teenager said his or her hero was Jesus Christ; not even Christian high schoolers. I know my sampling was very limited, and if I ask 12 more I might get Jesus as an answer, but, frankly I doubt it. Why? I have several reasons.

The world seems to be in a mad rush for what Andy Wahol said in 1968, “In the future, everyone will be famous for 15 minutes.” We have never had more resources for creating “instant celebrities” as we have today. Radio, television, and the print media has over the past 50 plus years make persons celebrities “overnight”, but not as numerous and instant as today.

Today we have an array of electronic media devices for creating instant celebrities. A post on YouTube, Twitter, FaceBook, a website, or on a Blog can launch a person into a worldwide viewing audience; and will have a good chance of being picked up by the evening news as a featured story. The 15 minutes of fame, which is usually short lived, is waiting for everyone. Yes, I know that as media outlets these channels aren’t wrong per say; it’s the misuse of them that should concern Christians. The motives for celebrity status must concern us.

With hundreds of cable and satellite channels invading the homes of those who choose to have them; there seems to be no boundaries or subjects that can’t become a reality show. Our nation is becoming a nation of “reality junkies.” These instant celebrities fill the airwaves with everything from “housewives” who fuss and fight, to persons who are scavengers for road kill in order to save on the grocery bill. Just when you think you’ve seen an advertisement for the worst yet, one even grosser is offered. There is a keep it coming mentality craving such shows.

I know, some are really funny to some viewers, but not to everyone. Humor couched in insinuations, put-downs, sexual connotations, and negativism, doesn’t contribute to the purity of heart Jesus requires (Matthew 5:8). It’s still true, “As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he” (Proverbs 23:7).

The initial surge of celebrityism began with American movies and the stars they produced in Hollywood. Before that there were a few persons who achieved fame but nothing like that which was later bestowed upon the stars of the silver screen. In the meantime athletes’ were receiving more and more attention (e.g. Babe Ruth, etc.). Soon radio, phonograph records and television became the magic pipelines for creating fame. A supportive industry was created by commentators and magazines to spread the flame of fame. A new generation of “celebrity watchers” emerged. Even “worship” of stars has resulted.

There is little doubt that the desire for fame, as well as the attraction to fame has become a built-in part of our American society. The other side of the celebrity coin is the disillusionment many achievers of fame have experienced. Yet, in spite of this reality, people still have a thirst to know about, see, meet, touch, or be in the stadium or theater where a celebrity is; perhaps deep

inside longing for such fame for self. At least they can brag to their friends.

My concern as a Christian is the influence these symbolic leaders in our society are having on the church and her mission in the world. After we wade through the thousands of pages on leadership, it all boils down to the fact that all leadership relates to influence. Thus, a symbolic leader is a person who functions through his place, image and meaning created by the spotlight of fame. Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. meant much as persons to the masses of India and the United States—in fact to most of the world, regardless of their official status. Thus, pointing out the difference between leading in a structure of one organization, and the global structure of fame. Through in their status as a symbol they become symbolic leaders for certain mindsets.

Take for example the impact certain celebrities have had, and are having, on our children. They have influenced everything from their lingo language, dress, reading, music, hairstyle, and aspirations' in life. Mystical heroes, witches, and werewolves' have become their idols; as they wait for the next book, game, or movie to come out. And yes, many parents share their interest, if not obsession, with such celebrities. This is symbolic leadership in action.

The contrasts are obvious. While there are a few persons in the media spotlight championing the cause of right, such as an NFL star, who is ridiculed by media and the public; the media attention on the weird, harsh, vulgar, daring, questionable, and even sinful covers the globe. In a sense a “star in born” every time a new TV Guide comes out. Something is wrong in our country.

The command to “Abstain from all appearance of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22), is a daily challenge for every Christian in our media saturated society. It is of interest to note that the Greek word used for “abstain” is *apecho* and means “to hold oneself from; to keep oneself from”. The objective is to refrain from “evil.” This raises the discussion among some relative to “What is evil?” This was also a problem in the days of Isaiah: “Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil; who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness; who substitute bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter” (Isaiah 5:20). This is why God has given us a thinking agenda; a way to discern between good and evil (cf. Philippians 4:6-9). Thus we must “bring every thought into captivity and the obedience of Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5). He is our leader.

The closing questions are: Who are we following? A symbolic leader or the Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ? Second, do we realize just how much influence the symbolic leaders are having on every phases of our lives; even in the church? It is obvious that numerous congregations are going backward instead of forward relative to growth and influence. This raises the question of leadership. And ironically, a congregation may be influenced by a symbolic leader within their ranks.

This brings the neglected subject of congregational leadership back to the table. Are we ready to have a discussion about symbolic leaders and leadership?

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