

Reformed Celebrities and Other Oxymorons

Some Introductory Thoughts

As you know, I have been asked to speak about *Reformed Celebrityism*. I am not exactly sure why my name came up in connection with the topic but it may have something to do with the article I wrote about 4 years ago on the *Cult of Personality*. If that is the case, fine; if not, that is fine too, because the subject needs to be looked at by those who are called to minister for Christ in the opening part of the 21st century. If anything the issues surrounding the cult of personality or Reformed Celebrityism have grown worse in recent years as the church struggles to stand apart from a culture dominated by celebrities.

In approaching the topic, however, there are a number of elephants in the room that I need to mention. First, I do not want to appear to be just another grumpy old man who is complaining just because he likes complaining, or because he has nothing else to do. It is so easy to be critical of others because I am envious or jealous, or even because my feelings are hurt. If I feel left out or that acclaim has passed me by even though I am more worthy of those on whom it has rested, I can easily become bitter and cynical. As the years go by, you start to see the same kinds of ideas, trends, and people – the names and faces may have changed – but the rest remains the same with maybe a new twist here and there. That beings said it is important to put personal feelings aside and try to be as objective as possible.

Second, my thoughts on the subject are still evolving and because I am dealing, for the most part, with Christian brothers and sisters I need to be as gracious and charitable as I can. There are many ways to do ministry within the boundaries established by scripture. Not all will appeal to me personally and I need to distinguish carefully between biblical principle and personal preference. My calling is unique in certain ways, and so is yours, but there are some things that we share in common by virtue of the fact that we have been called by the Lord Jesus Christ to serve him in his church. I think it is healthy for all of us to evaluate what we are doing in light of scripture and never more so than today.

Third, in the history of the Christian church there have always been those who have been used by the Lord in a more public way and we should be thankful for them. We might immediately think of Augustine, Luther, and Calvin, or Wesley, Whitefield, and Edwards, to name a few. There is nothing wrong with this and the Lord always has the right person in place “for such a time as this” (cf. Esther 4:14). But it is one thing for someone to stand out in history as he goes about his work, it is another for him to chase after the spotlight and in that way appear to be calling out, “Look at me, look at me!” In my opinion we need more *disinterested* servants – that is, unbiased by personal interest or advantage; not influenced by selfish motives – in our day as will become clear as we turn to the scriptures.

A Biblical Starting-point

There are many biblical characters whose lives are exemplary when it comes to service but in this presentation I have chosen to look at the prophetic ministry of John the Baptist. It began with great acclaim and it was not long before crowds of people followed him and hung on his every word. In a

short period of time he went from relative obscurity to a position of ministerial prominence even though his ministry venue was unorthodox and he lived outside the centers of power and influence. It seems that from the start people sensed that God's Spirit was with John in a special way as had not been the case with anyone else for a long time. His practice of baptizing people in water as a sign of repentance in preparation for the coming of the Lord, brought people to him from far and wide, and his powerful, applicatory preaching was heard by multitudes. But for all this, his meteoric rise did not last for long. Even though he was a fresh voice calling people to get ready for the coming of the Lord, after he submitted to a request from his cousin Jesus to baptize him in order to fulfill all righteousness, John's ministry began to decline. After his baptism in the Jordan River, Jesus began to preach about the coming of the kingdom of God in a way that put him front and center. As powerful as John's preaching had been, Jesus preached with even greater power because he taught with a unique first person authority and not like the teachers of the law. As a result, Jesus popularity skyrocketed and more and more people began to attend to his words. Among these followers were some who had followed John, and this to such a degree that some of John's most loyal disciples complained to their teacher that, "everyone is going over to him" (John 3:26).

Now if John had been concerned about himself, his reputation, and his ministry, he would have taken steps to curtail the slippage and boost his popularity. But this is not what he did. He understood his role in the history of redemption – not perfectly, but sufficiently! His response was quite different from someone whose primary concern is to build up their own following or brand. He knew that God had called to be the forerunner of the Messiah, his job was to prepare the way, and to announce the coming of the king. Or to change the metaphor, he was the friend of the bridegroom and he awaited his arrival. Now that Jesus, the messianic bridegroom had come, he understood that he must fade into the background. His primary job was done and as John put it, "He (Jesus) must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30).

The Centrality of Jesus Christ

John's attitude is exemplary and instructive beyond his own unique role as the messianic forerunner. He was the final prophet of the old covenant era and he shows us what our attitude ought to be when it comes to Jesus and our relationship with him. The gospel and the new covenant that Jesus inaugurated in his own blood is centered in him. The entire New Testament makes this clear and passages like Hebrews 1:1-2 underscore the fact – "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe." In Colossians 1:15-20 Paul describes Jesus as the Son who is, "the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."

These, and many other passages, (cf. Matt.1:21, 23; 5:17-19; 7:21-23; John 1:1-2; 3:16; 14:6; Rom.1:1-4) teach that Christianity is about Jesus Christ! He is at the centre of God's salvation. Christianity is about declaring our allegiance to him and following him wherever he leads us. The gospel is not about us even though it has something wonderful to say to us. It is not man-centered but God-centered. This is foundational and basic. This is biblical Christianity. We have been redeemed in order that we might live for his honor and glory all our days. Everything we do should be for his praise. What John the Baptist said about himself should be true of everyone who follows Jesus – "He must become greater; I must become less" (John 3:30).

The apostle Paul was conscious of the same thing. Writing to his young protégé Timothy he says, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me trustworthy, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief... here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst. But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his immense patience as an example for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life" (1 Timothy 1:12-16). And to the Corinthians, Paul writes: "When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:1-5).

But while this should be the direction of our lives, and should reflect the state of our minds and hearts, it is not always that way and our churches and lives give evidence of other priorities. Too often we are selfish and self-centered and we act we though the universe revolves around us, our goals, and objectives. We betray the fact that we live in a very me-oriented culture where the letter "I" is used to define more than electronic devices. Not wanting to be left behind we uncritically and unconsciously adopt the ways of the world and as Christians forget that it is not about us but about the exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ alone. Of course, we tell ourselves that we are serving him and furthering his cause, but is that really the case, or are we just fooling ourselves?

Personality Based Ministry

Today, the church in the West, struggles with what can be called "the cult of personality." This cult is the antithesis of the self-effacing attitude that characterized John the Baptist, the apostle Paul, and every other biblical writer. Instead, it is the domination of the church by egos and personalities that have become larger than Jesus himself. Rarely, if ever, is this the stated intention of the people involved. Few would dare to deliberately usurp the place that belongs to Christ alone. The cult of personality, however, is subtler than that. It happens when men put themselves front and centre in their ministries and churches. When everything revolves around them, their sermons, thoughts, opinions, plans, posts, tweets, and programs! Ironically, this kind of thing can be seen at Christian conferences when the foyers and halls outside the main conference room resemble a trade show where a variety of salesmen hock

their wares. Although it is anachronistic to talk this way, I cannot imagine the apostles setting up ministry tables where Peter, Andrew, and John could sell and promote their latest ministry initiatives. There is certainly nothing wrong with making Christian literature and other resources available to conference attendees, but it is another thing to blatantly promote one's own products. Another example of the cult of personality are conferences that are built around individual personalities or a collection of personalities while ostensibly meeting to promote the gospel. The banners with their names and faces plastered on them and the video presentations that tell of all their accomplishments point the thoughtful attendee in a different direction. In fact, the level of self-promotion within evangelicalism these days is embarrassing. But while these gospel "superstars" bask in the glory of their fans in their own little sphere of influence, the words, "He must become greater; I must become less," seem to have been conveniently forgotten.

The Satellite or Multi-Campus Church

Another manifestation of the current pre-occupation with self is the existence of "satellite" or "multi-campus churches." These are churches, or parts of churches, that meet in different locations but are still taught by one primary pastor who speaks to them weekly by means of video broadcast. Usually this experience is supplemented by small groups that meet during the week to compensate for the Sunday movie theater experience, and it is in these groups that the real fellowship and spiritual life building takes place. Here my concern is not with the fact that people are being creative in their presentation of the gospel and the way the church is structured, but with that fact that there is still only one pastor-teacher. While this may make him look important and indispensable in the eyes of others, I think that it represents a major failure to do what the gospel requires of Christian leaders. Where the gospel is preached and people are gathered in such numbers that a "satellite" or "campus" is required, leaders should be identified and trained who are able to do the work of the ministry in those distinct locations. This includes the vital work of preaching the word of God. If there are no additional leaders and one man must do the bulk of the preaching and teaching, something is wrong. It should not be necessary for one man to do most of the pulpit ministry, nor is it health for one man to do so. If new congregations are birthed by the Spirit of God, he will give them shepherds who will care for their spiritual needs. Pastors and elders who are doing their jobs properly should be identifying and training those who can carry on the ministry of the word in different places and in the years to come. Rather than one man appearing on a screen in different locations, men who have been set apart and trained for the work of the Christian ministry should be taking their place in these new congregations.

Non-Denominational Denominationalism

Another symptom of the current malaise is the development of a new kind of "non-denominational denominationalism" (sic) that is largely organized around a particular teacher or leader, or a certain church "brand," rather than around core doctrinal distinctives. Traditional denominations like Anglican, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, or Baptist, call people together around a set of beliefs about the meaning of scripture and the key doctrines it articulates. But these new groups reflect the image of the man at the top whose vision and direction casts a shadow over the whole group. These new denominations also tend to have an authoritarian view of eldership that leaves little room for the

tangible involvement of the congregation. This too is problematic. In the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus, all of God's people have the Spirit, and while there is a gifting and calling that rest on some people to serve as elders in the church, they do not possess the Spirit in a way that is *qualitatively* different from the rest of God's people. Practically, this means that the line between leaders and the led, is not as great as it is supposed. The reality of this new covenant work of the Holy Spirit should be evident in the way the church is structured and organized. This means that the church needs to be structured in a way that allows for real give and take between the elders and the congregation. But unfortunately, in many of these new groups the organizational models are too heavily weighted in terms of elders with the congregation having very little say. This may be conducive to efficiency but it is not helpful when it comes to hearing what the Lord is saying to the churches. Jesus is the true head of the church and leaders and people alike own exclusive allegiance to him. There is an equality in the new covenant community that must be respected and reflected in the church.

Personality-Based Church Growth

At a more personal level, it is well known that in the formation of new churches there is far more growth as a result of "member transfer" than there is as a result of genuine conversion to Christ. There are many reasons for this phenomenon. One reason is that people shop for churches like they do any other commodity and when they do they are influenced by their own need for personal fulfillment and what the church offers them, as much as they are by anything else. In this kind of consumer environment, it is increasing difficult for a church to retain members unless they have a pastoral staff who can hold their attention and scurry to meet their every need. Once again we see the power of personality coming alongside truth, the gospel, and a sense of mission to serve the Lord. No church is perfect and there is nothing that obligates a person to stay in a particular congregation forever. Sometimes change is good and necessary, but today there is little loyalty. People are in for what they can get out of it. And the pastor or ministry team that is the most attractive, forceful, or pandering, often wins the day. We need more gospel preaching, teaching, and evangelism so that churches grow as a result of regenerating work of the Spirit of God.

Church Planting versus Rebuilding

In a related issue, no serious Christian questions the need to plant new churches especially where there is a need to take the gospel to people who have never heard it before. This is one obvious entailment of the so-called "Great Commission" in Matt.28:18-20. But sometimes we must admit that church planting is pursued for less noble reasons. Take, for example, the case of a pastor who takes up his ministry in a new existing congregation. This is not always easy – maybe it is never easy! There are all sorts of different people to deal with, a history of interactions that may or may not be happy ones, and church traditions that have developed over the years that may need changing if the church is going to move forward into the future. Rather than face up to these formidable challenges, the impression is sometimes given that it is easier to plant a church than to rebuild one because it can be set up the way we want and in this way we can minimize the idiosyncrasies, scruples, and convictions of others. In this scenario the leadership team is in control and the call the shots from the get-go. Or take the common observation that church plants often target groups of people who come from similar backgrounds, and

share the same interests and tastes. While these plants might exude a superficial appearance of unity, it is frequently a far cry from the radical unity in diversity that is found in the New Testament church. This unity crosses lines that normally are not crossed and brings to together people who are drawn but the truth of the gospel and the efficacious work of the Holy Spirit. Churches need to be planted where the truth is not known or is not being taught as it should. Church plants should not be tributes to personal or denominational ambition, or style, or the newness or coolness factor. None of these things provide a sufficient foundation on which to build a church, and they are not likely to sustain a gospel-centered ministry over the long haul. In fact, I fear that they contribute to a soft, spoiled, consumer type of Christianity that is a poor substitute for the real thing.

Entertainment-Based Ministry

Another example of the cult of personality is entertainment-based ministry in which the congregation is little more than an audience who exists to give the professional performers an opportunity to “do their thing.” The performer may be a musician, or preacher, or brilliant intellect or personality who impresses the crowd with their gifts and makes people feel better for being there. When this happens the church becomes a mere stage, or a music hall, or a preaching centre, where the people come and sit and watch the performers perform. This is not to say that music and preaching, for example, are not important parts of church life. It is to make the point the Christian worship is more than just sitting and watching talented musicians perform and skilled preachers preach. There is kingdom work to be done, people to disciple, spiritual, financial and physical needs to be met both inside and outside of the church. Christianity is about more than watching and cheering on performers from the pews or stackable chairs. It is about coming together to be taught and equipped to go out and truly worship God by obeying his commands and living out the implications of the gospel before a watching world. The church does not exist for the display of our talents or to stroke our egos. Rather, it is a place where we learn and grow in fellowship with others so that we can do our part to contribute to the growth of the kingdom of God.

Organizational Make-Work Projects

One final example of the cult of personality is the tendency for pastors to get involved in what could be called “organizational make-work projects.” Most pastors have their hands full looking after the people the Lord has entrusted to their care. But in our day – when the church is in a serious state of decline and revival is just an historical relic – too many are occupying themselves with endless organizational meetings, and the development of umbrella, para-church type groups. These have limited value for a time, but we must be careful that they do not become a vehicle to boost our prestige while and making us look busy and important. In my experience they do little to help busy pastor-teachers grow in their grasp of biblical truth and their ability to articulate it in their given context. Conferences are a good and necessary thing from time to time, and church leaders need to get together to encourage each other in the ministry. But these kinds of organizational efforts can take on a life of their own and while they may give the pastor something to report at the annual business meeting they can rob him of the time that must be spent in secret doing the kind of essential spiritual labor that no one else sees but God alone.

Antidotes and Solutions

The antidote to the “cult of personality” or “Reformed Celebrityism” is a firm grasp of the biblical message. We are very foolish if we put our hope in men (or women) – even the very best. Our hope must be in the Lord alone. Of course, everyone acknowledges that as a matter of perfunctory orthodoxy, but afterwards scurry to line up behind their favorite celebrities. Only the Lord can build the church because only he can bring sinners to life and to himself. It does not matter how organized we are, or how many books we have published, or blogs we written, or the level of our Facebook or Twitter saturation – what matters is that we do the best with the gifts God has given us and then wait on God to bless our efforts. In the end, it is not our cleverness, nor the power of our personalities, or the cogency of our arguments that will win the battle. The pervasive effects of sin are only reversed when God acts in saving power. We do not need more and more conferences and pep-rallies to alleviate our insecurities – we need more seasons of prayer and the bravery to step out of our comfort zones. We need stick-to-itiveness in the face of growing and Serpentine(sic) opposition, and patience that waits on the Lord knowing that he is never in a hurry. We must realize that it is not about brand names but about the name of Jesus. No one has a corner on the truth, and no church leader speaks exclusively for God, and no one speaks for God at all if their teaching does not reflect what is found in the scriptures. We do not need more ministry clones or groupies; we need more loyal, determined workers. We need to know what is according to the truth of scripture, and what is not, and we need to make much of Jesus as the only one who can do us ultimate good.

In short, we need balance. There is a fine line between honouring and idolizing our leaders. Between learning from them and treating them as though they are infallible. We need to train, plan, and execute our plans without forgetting that it is God who works in us according to his good pleasure. We need to broaden our horizons and see that God works in many different ways through many different people. He is not beholden to one particular group or way or style of doing things. He works through a variety of human vessels to accomplish his purposes. Many times he delights to use those who are weak and foolish in the eyes of the world to confound the strong, the wise, and the attractive.

It has been said many time before – but we are called to be faithful, first and foremost, not successful. This oft repeated truth is difficult to internalize because most of the time it is the “successful” – by the standards of the world – who are paraded before us. We are inundated with their ideas (even if they say the same thing over and over and over again) while the real heroes of the faith continue to do the work God has assigned for them without fanfare or applause. The truth of the matter is, that for all the hero worship evangelical power and influence in Canada (and in many other places) is evaporating and our segment of the religious population is shrinking. It should be obvious by now that the more we imitate the world, the more we sabotage our message. The world is “star” obsessed and so easily influenced by movie stars, athletes, musicians, business and media stars. Their every move is tracked and discussed. They are followed by many tens or hundreds of thousands on Facebook and Twitter and Instagram, etc. They are quoted in magazines and on the evening news. But their fame is fleeting, they rarely possess exceptional wisdom, and they are only praised as long as they continue to spout the politically correct orthodoxy of those who have rebelled against divine revelation. But it is all

about appearances, making the right impression, gathering a crowd of followers who will buy whatever they are selling, and living in the moment.

As Christians, we are called to resemble Jesus who was never fooled by outward appearances but instead focused on the heart. He said and did the right thing whether or not it was popular or advantageous to his image. When a crowd gathered around him he told them the truth whether they liked it or not, during the days of his earthly ministry he always lived in light of eternity to come and the fulfillment of the plan made within the Godhead in eternity past. Jesus, and he alone, is our role model and star. And the irony is that the more we are like him and therefore different from the world that is in rebellion against him, the more we will have something substantial to say and the more people will sit up and take notice. The hard truth is that the best of us has little to offer in ourselves! There is no sense pretending otherwise. It is far better to acknowledge our bankruptcy and make much of Christ in whom is hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge (Col.2:3).

If we are to do this in that way truly meet the needs of the hour, we must commit ourselves afresh to Bible study, prayer, apologetics, and the practice of self-giving love. In my experience there are more churches looking for qualified pastors than there are such persons. There are many challenges ahead of us and we need more than smoke and mirrors! We need more than a good show! More than a skillfully run organization! We need the power of the living God! The cult of personality must go and in the words of John, the Baptist – “Jesus must become greater, and we must become less” (John 3:30).