

Without The Applause: Examining Celebrity Culture In The Church

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I recently wrote an article which I called '[Beneath The Skin](#)'; a critique of sorts of modern Christianity and the Western church.

The article focused primarily on the collective Christian identity; *The Church*, not on any one particular denomination or way of 'doing church' but, rather, on the church's influence and presence, as a whole, in the world today. I endeavored to identify both *the good* and *the bad*, historically and now, but, in particular, I was looking for an answer to a specific question: what was beneath the skin of the modern, Western church?

Was there still a heart beating for Jesus, a life still given in allegiance to the king?

Was the church still the 'woman of valour' for whom Jesus died, shining brightly in a darkened and impoverished world through her most basic and guiding principle: that is, to incarnate Christ?

Or had she exchanged her birthright for a mess of pottage, trading persecution for privilege, and skeptical dismissal for a platform of popularity?

In this article, I want to dig a little deeper, to take a closer look at one of the issues I think played a part in asking this question. I want to examine the phenomenon of *celebrity culture* within the modern Western church and, in

particular, the influence this culture has had on the average, ordinary Christian.

Social Reach

With the rise of social media and the massive reach of online platforms, there's no doubt that the ability of the Christian faith to be expressed and shared has increased exponentially. The ability to virtually connect, through live streaming or recorded services, was demonstrated to be invaluable in more recent times when many churches worldwide were forced to close their physical doors during the COVID-19 crisis. For many people, this was the only way they were able to still 'go to church' and connect with their faith community through long periods of isolation and disconnection.

Many faith communities now count in their membership those who may only attend church virtually (for a variety of reasons) and the reach of these various faith communities, in terms of missions and evangelism, goes well beyond their actual geographic borders.

It seems hard to believe, but the means that makes this even possible – the internet – is only just over 30 years old. Although an electronic information network of sorts already existed prior to the early 80s, it was almost entirely text-based and difficult to use and barely resembled the online network that we recognise today.

"Almost everything which you needed to know in your daily life was written down somewhere," Berners-Lee [creator of the World Wide Web], told NPR's Fresh Air in 1996. "And at the time, in the 1980s, it was almost certainly written down on a computer somewhere. It was very frustrating that people's effort in typing it in was not being used when, in fact, if it could only be tied together and made accessible, everything would be so much easier for everybody."

In April 1993, everything changed forever. The World Wide Web was launched into the public domain, becoming the first royalty-free, easy-to-use means of browsing the emerging information network that developed into the Internet as we know it today. It's estimated that there are now 5.19 billion internet users (of a total world population of 8.1 billion people (as at August 2023)). The total number of internet users around the world has grown by 105 million during the past 12 months alone.

In the three decades since the web went public, the way in which we communicate, how information is shared, and how we connect has changed completely. The internet has expanded the reach of many valuable causes and community endeavours, but it has also increased the level of propaganda and disinformation, as well as challenging our standards of privacy and security.

For Christianity, this level of connectivity is somewhat of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it offers the opportunity for preaching, mission activities, and the expression of faith to be shared on a global scale in a time-effective manner. But, particularly for the individual, it also offers the alluring possibility of a global stage, with the ability to curate a popular (but often artificial) public persona, within the reach of millions through a simple tap of the keyboard. Anyone can become *someone*, with something to say and an audience to hear it.

Obscurity, mediocrity, and martyrdom have been replaced by an unnatural emphasis on personas, platforms, and profits. The era of 'Celebrity Christianity' is well and truly upon us.

A Toxic Culture Of Self

Don't get me wrong. I love the internet and social media as much as the next person. I believe huge value can be added to the church; to our various ministries, and to the lives of regular, ordinary Christians through collaborating together in

this form of information exchange. Social media and the internet are phenomenal tools for sharing the gospel, enabling churches to be more discoverable in their local area, and for sharing resources with a wider audience than only in-person services would allow. This kind of exposure may make a church or an individual Christian *well-known*, however, but not necessarily result in *celebrity* status.

Celebrity, unlike fame, is another animal altogether. While celebrity can't exist without fame – broad public recognition, it goes beyond mere recognition alone, devolving into intense public interest, attention, and, frequently, adulation. This *cult of personality*, particularly when related to individuals, often focuses entirely on what is perceived or promoted, not necessarily what is real, with the idolising of an individual creating a level of adoration beyond what is natural or healthy.

Celebrity Christianity turns an individual into a brand, encourages the promotion of self, necessitates the ongoing careful curation of a popular public image, irrespective of whether it is authentic, and runs the risk of reducing the gospel to merely a vehicle for global Christian consumerism.

Within Celebrity Christianity, ministries, churches, and people's faith are often orientated around a central, charismatic figure who wields immense social influence and power, but whose platform is devoid of personal proximity or systems of accountability.

Writer and editor Katelyn Beaty, in her book *Celebrities for Jesus*, makes the distinction between *fame*, a morally neutral state of being known by more people than you know, and *celebrity*, with its focus on self-promotion and brand-building. "The right kind of fame," she writes, "arises from a life well lived, not a brand well cultivated."

We're all, of course, aware of the rise and fall of many well-

known celebrity pastors and preachers, who got about in their fancy cars, wearing trendy outfits, with their slick media team and an entourage of understudies. Celebrated and acclaimed while they were in public favour, they quickly became the focus of criticism and derision, by Christians and the secular world alike, when their true private lives became known and their moral failures and abuses were exposed.

Yet they are not alone in their blame. To some degree, we are all complicit in allowing this toxic celebrity culture to grow, unchecked, within the Church. We gave them their platform, we encouraged their rise to Christian stardom, and we promoted *their kind of Christianity* as somehow superior and more praiseworthy. And, by *their kind of Christianity* I mean, with our platform-centric churches and our consumer-driven services, we have not-so-subtly sent the message that anything worth saying must be said from a stage and that the ordinary faithfulness of regular Christians is, well, a little boring and not particularly noteworthy.

At its core, celebrity Christianity is about *pseudo-love* or *the feeling of love* that we get from Christian celebrities and which they, in turn, get from us. This degree of people worship is a disturbing tell, betraying the reality that we are, in many ways, a deeply narcissistic society, obsessed with and in love with self, more attracted to personality than character, more inspired by charisma than moral courage.

We have turned people into gods, worshipping the created rather than the Creator, looking to humans to satisfy us, rather than turning to the One in whom we live and move and have our very being.

We all “feed celebrity by turning to famous people to meet our own social and emotional needs,” Katelyn Beaty comments.

Things We've Lost Under The Glare Of The Stage Lights

With our eyes blinded by the bright lights of celebrity, perhaps we've forgotten some of the foundational truths of the Christian life; spiritual disciplines that faithful Christians have endeavoured to live out for centuries.

The call to ordinary faithfulness

Fame doesn't necessarily come at the expense of faithfulness. Jesus, of course, was and still is one of the most famous men on the planet and yet would also be the supreme example of trust and confidence in God. But, by and large, the Christian life is not about notoriety but about quiet humility; taking up our cross daily, dying to self, and following Jesus wherever he leads.

This kind of faith rarely looks glamorous and is unlikely to make the daily news. More often than not, it goes largely unnoticed by all but One.

Maybe it's simply holding down two jobs in order to provide for your family and meet your financial responsibilities. Perhaps it's committing to authenticity and honesty in your relationships; business, friendship, community, church, romantic, and parental, choosing to make God at the heart and centre of your interactions. Maybe it's continuing to trust God, even through challenging and difficult circumstances like job loss, ill health, or relationship troubles. Maybe it's volunteering in service in your local church in steady and joyful commitment. Maybe it's doing the right thing, even (or perhaps especially) when no one is looking. At all times it is, as Eugene Peterson puts it, *a long obedience in the same direction*; committed discipleship through worship, service, joy, work, happiness, humility, community, and blessing.

This is the kind of ordinary faithfulness that is, in fact,

extraordinary; a Jesus-saturated culture that takes root and thrives in the lives of ordinary people, and which replicates in the lives of all those who come into contact with them.

The relevance of the local church

This *long obedience in the same direction* – discipleship – is outworked primarily as part of a local church. As Jonathan Leeman puts it, *‘the local church enables the world to look upon the canvas of God’s people and see an authentic painting of Christ’s love and holiness. The local church lays down a pathway with guardrails and resting stations for the long journey of the Christian life.’*

Yet so many Christians only think of church as something they go to rather than something they identify as. They may describe themselves as Christian in a general sense, but feel no real connection to or fail to see the relevance of the local church and their participation in it.

Paul the Apostle speaks at length about the connection between the individual and the church. He comments in the book of Corinthians that “God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it”. This body of believers is governed or directed in all its functions by the head, who is Jesus. Through Christ’s work on the cross, Christians have been made his body, his family, his temple, his people, his flock, his joy and crown. But they only become these things collectively, never individually. The moment an individual becomes a Christian is the moment they *stop being merely* an individual Christian.

As author Rachel Held Evans comments, *“Christianity isn’t meant to simply be believed; it’s meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people. Try as I may, I can’t be a Christian on my own. I need a community. I need the church.”*

The relevance and significance of being part of a Christian

community can not be overstated, yet global connection has, in many ways, increased local disconnection to the heart and soul of Christian life.

More important than which online pastors we follow, what podcasts we listen to, or what Christian books we buy, is the essential reality that every Christian needs to belong to a gospel-centred local church (if this is geographically possible, of course).

It's only by being part of the local church that we can participate in and contribute to the collective Christian activities that have marked the church as unique throughout the centuries; those of 'worship', 'fellowship', 'discipleship', ministry', and 'evangelism'.

The priesthood of every believer

Under the old covenant made with the people of Israel, only one priest from a particular priestly family or class could enter into the Holy Place, approach the glory of God, and mediate between God and humanity as a representative of all the people.

All that changed because of Jesus. Through his reconciling work, the new covenant was instituted, where both Jew and Gentile could become part of God's family, where all people could draw near and find forgiveness and restoration of their relationship with God. The mediating work has been done, once, and for all time by the greatest of all priests, Jesus himself. Because believers become part of Jesus' body, part of the living temple of God, each one of us becomes an ambassador of this great ministry of reconciliation, people of the kingdom, collectively, a 'holy nation', in essence, a *priesthood of every believer* (Exodus 19:6, 1 Peter 2:9)

The church is not some kind of class system or hierarchy, where only some minister and others merely watch on as spectators, but a collective organic reality, a *kingdom of*

priests, in which every person witnesses and ministers, loves and serves alongside one another, as God has gifted them, for the good of the whole and the glory of His name.

There is more for each one of us to step into, and not merely as passive participants, but as active ambassadors in God's great story of reconciliation, members of the priesthood of every believer. Don't let celebrity culture tell you that you need a platform or notoriety or global influence in order to minister. You don't. You already know more than you need to know in order to do what you need to do. Simply make a start and get active in your church.

The sufficiency of Jesus

What we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord and saviour. For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

When we allow this truth to shine out of us, authentically and unvarnished, we discover, perhaps to our surprise, that Jesus is more than sufficient. His life-giving work on the cross, his selfless example of a life well lived, and his declaration of the sovereignty of God is more than powerful enough to transform the hardest of hearts. He doesn't need the lights, the cameras, the noise, the fancy clothes, the clever remarks, witty arguments, or public protestations of fervour.

He doesn't need any of it to impact a person's heart, to call them to himself, to transform and redeem them.

But the knowledge of this grace, of life-giving light, has been entrusted to us as a treasure shining out of rough jars of clay. It's our responsibility and our privilege to let this light – *his light* – shine brightly, to point the world to him, and to believe in his sufficiency and power to save.

Anything we do, if it has any power at all, is only because it

flows from a life saturated in God, Who is love itself, and empowered by His life-giving spirit,

Celebrity culture tells us we need to be more. Scripture tells us that God's power is made perfect in our weakness and that in that weakness, the sufficiency of Jesus is still more than enough.