

When celebrity culture comes to church



Mike Ovey looks at celebrity in the life of our culture and in church and asks: what would the Apostle Paul say about it?



It's a familiar enough problem. We talk quite a lot about it and I wonder whether we quite know what to do about it. The problem is evangelical celebrity culture.

But let me pose a question. What's wrong with a celebrity culture? I take the point that the celebrities celebrated by the world – such as Kate Moss, Russell Brand and others unwise enough to patronise Jonathan Ross's show – can readily seem a bit odd. But what's wrong with us evangelicals having our own celebrity culture?

In fact, you can imagine people saying that we do indeed have our own celebrity culture. You could argue that it is manifest in the way we advertise conferences (not so much on the substance of what is taught but on who teaches it) through to the way we listen to big names on the web, no matter what they are taking about.

I think we do have a certain suspicion of celebrity culture, but I wonder whether it isn't one of those partial suspicions, the kind of suspicion that is operative when I am looking at your celebrities, or when you are looking at mine: I am ready enough to be suspicious of your choice of celebrities, while not being similarly suspicious of the celebrity status that key individuals enjoy within my own little group. It can be almost like an irregular verb...

I have respected pastors who are teaching giants.

You have showmen.

He, she or it has glitzy but empty celebrities who are one step away from being charlatans.

We could at this point just give a shrug of the shoulders and say it is inevitable we have a celebrity culture in evangelical Christian circles. Arguably, that inevitability comes from the way there is an element of public performance in key aspects of Christian ministry, such as teaching the adult congregation. We may differ over who the celebrity is, but we will end up having one.

Paul does not, I think, allow us to do this. However, the way Paul deals with celebrity culture, or more accurately the version of celebrity culture in his context, is intriguing.

Look with me at 2 Corinthians, chapter 1 verse 12. Part of the context of 2 Corinthians is Paul's need to address the way that the church in Corinth has been affected by the visits of 'super apostles'. It is not the first time that personality has played a big part of the church in Corinth, as the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians show. Personalities there have been focal points for partisanship within the congregation.

By the time we are in 2 Corinthians, Paul is dealing with the aftermath of people coming in posing (as he says) as super apostles. That may be his term rather than theirs. They seem to have been hugely impressive, very capable of self advertisement, highly plausible and well versed in skills that would have been admired in the world outside the Corinthian church as well.

Paul's response is to enter a boast of his own in verse 12. It is a magnificently subversive moment. Why? Well, given everything that Paul says elsewhere about boasting, the last thing you expect him to do is boast. After all, for Paul boasting can only be done in God and in Christ Jesus. That is an emphatic note in his account of salvation. For him to boast here ought to rock us.



Deep down, do we want Christian versions of worldly celebrities, but with essentially the same values, or will the people we celebrate be those whose lives manifest Christ?

You could of course say that Paul is simply being inconsistent, or even slightly hypocritical, by forbidding others from boasting while vigorously indulging in it himself. That, however, is an unsatisfactory explanation because of what Paul is boasting in. His boast is about things that are deeply unglamorous: holiness and sincerity from God.

Whether they are considered by the pagan world of 1st century Corinth or the neo-pagan world of 21st century Britain, holiness and sincerity of heart are just not particularly sexy. Integrity of heart does not have the looks of George Clooney, nor the musculature of Daniel Craig. It does not have the high-sounding, ear-pleasing rhetoric of President Obama, nor the relentlessly self-advertising cleverness of Steven Fry – let alone the attention-grabbing wealth of Roman Abramovich. The obvious response to Paul's putative boast is to ask: 'Why on earth is it worth boasting in that?'

And that is the point. Paul's boast is based on something in which the super apostles would not boast. They would boast in qualities that are much more impressive, at least in the eyes of the world. And it's just there that you realise Paul is subverting the whole boasting package. By boasting in something so very unostentatious and so cringingly non-glitzzy, he undermines the kind of boast that points to how clever, how funny, how earthy, how in-your-face, how aggressive, how politically correct, how titillatingly shocking, how high-class, how aesthetic – or whatever it may be – a particular person is.

By boasting in something so unworldly, Paul exposes just how worldly some of the Corinthian thinking is – and our thinking too, come to that. He makes us ask whether our celebrities boast in worldly or unworldly things. And by extension he gets us to question what we prize in our celebrities: worldly or unworldly things?

This in turn makes us ask whether, deep down, we want celebrities who are just Christian versions of worldly celebrities, but with essentially the same values, or whether the people we celebrate will be those whose lives manifest Christ, and whom we celebrate for that reason.

Now I add that final clause because, please note, there is a subtlety here. I think some of the people who are treated as celebrities by evangelicals have many godly characteristics. Nor would I dispute that they provide valuable spiritual leadership and teaching for our constituency.

But Paul's boast makes me face the question as to whether I boast in their godliness and integrity, and in their Christ-like qualities, or whether I major on some of their other qualities which in fact are virtues and values that I prize along with the world.

If you want a biblical parallel here, the one that springs to mind is the request by the people of Israel to have a king. The request raises an critical issue: will this king be a king like the nations have, or will he be a king after God's own heart? One reason why this kingship language seems appropriate to me in the context of celebrity is that kings lead, provide examples and create focal points for cultural unity.

Whether I like it or not, it seems to me that our secular culture, while it sometimes likes to pull celebrities down, nevertheless looks to them for that kind of example and lead. The fact that some are counted as our celebrities while others aren't says something about the kind of examples and the kind of focal point that contemporary culture wants.

Similarly with us. How far, do you think, does Paul subvert the values on which we make some people heroes?

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