Part 1

The Dangers of the Christian Personality Cult

Peter Ditzel

The world loves celebrities, stars, heroes, and superheroes. Although the production of superhero live-action films, animations, and television series constitutes a multi-billion dollar industry, we're not satisfied with purely fictional heroes. We also take movie stars, television personalities, musicians, authors, chefs, medical professionals, even scientists, philosophers, and religious gurus of various beliefs, and we turn them into idols. We even have the various Idol and Idol-type shows around the globe in which we look for more idols. Given this penchant for elevating mere humans to larger-than-life status, it shouldn't be surprising that we then apply our desire for idols to Christian speakers and writers.

For many in this latter group, "Christian" must be applied very loosely, and they might better be labeled syncretic, blending Christian ideas with Eastern and New Age beliefs. But some who more closely teach and preach from the Bible, some even holding the position of pastor in a megachurch, rise to become national and international stars. Local churches, too, can have their own celebrities, often treating their pastors as infallible superstars. And it is this attribute of infallibility, or at least near faultlessness, which followers tend to ascribe to their "Christian" favorites, that I want to address in this article.

Star Power

Humans are sinful, and one of our weaknesses is idolatry. Acting upon this weakness, we have a tendency to raise some people to a superstar status. When we consider that these superstars are beyond the reach of criticism, we have fallen into a logical fallacy called star power. Star power divides into several subsets, one of which is the popular tendency to accept an argument based on the celebrity of the person making the argument: Robert DiCloonio says the moon is made of green cheese. Robert DiCloonio is my idol. Therefore, the moon is made of green cheese. Using the moon being made of green cheese makes this sound ridiculous. But, in fact, star power fallacy is very common. The advertising industry has been successfully using one version of this fallacy for many decades. Using actors, singers, athletes, talk show hosts, musicians, and other famous people to promote items ranging from breakfast cereals to skin cream to credit...
cards apparently works to increase sales despite the fact that we have no reason to believe that these stars have any special knowledge of these products.

Closely related is the version of star power in which we believe an assertion, adopt an opinion, or take a particular side in a controversy because a popular person holds that position. This is especially so if we are a devoted fan of the celebrity. Specifically, this is the cult of personality.

As you can imagine, it is not a large step to take the cult of personality from, "I hold this position because my favorite star holds it," to, "My favorite star holds this position, and that proves it must be right." At that point, the star, hero, or idol becomes unassailable and infallible. Additionally, fans will often attribute to their idol positive moral qualities such as impartiality, honesty, altruism, and general goodness. Such misguided thinking is closely associated with politics, especially during political campaigns. But it's also common in many other areas of life.

The Cult of Personality Among Christians

What happens, then, when star power or the cult of personality comes into Christianity? Simply put, people take a pastor or teacher or evangelist who is a persuasive speaker and writer and make him or her into an idol. Using the word idol might sound excessive, but when loyalty to these people takes precedence over faithfulness to God's Word, idol is an appropriate description.

Sometimes, the person purposely works toward the goal of becoming a superstar by using a detailed, long-reaching public relations plan. Other times, the person doesn't seek the attention but gets swept up into it. Either way, it is the focus of their fans on them, and the loyalty of their followers to their teachings, that allows them to maintain their position.

On the national and international level, this results in television and radio and speaking engagement personalities who are followed and admired by fans who are seduced into seeing them as morally virtuous and wise and authoritative on all subjects that they address. As far as their fans are concerned, they are unassailable. Anyone who dares question or criticize what one of these superheroes says is pounced upon as obviously wrong and perhaps even having evil motives because he or she has attacked "God's anointed."
Sadly, the cult of personality also is a common phenomenon at the local level. Whether initiated by the pastor or the congregation, the church pastor becomes a virtual demigod. Whatever he teaches, be it ever so unbiblical, becomes the church's official teaching and must never be challenged. Everything that takes place in the church, or even in the personal lives of the members, must meet with his approval. The truth is, he is no longer a servant and shepherd of God's people; he is an idol who exalts himself above the Word of God.

**Not a New Problem**

I find the cult of personality among Christians of concern because it seems to be on the rise. This may be due to Christian teachers using all of the new media to gain large followings. It's not, however, a new phenomenon. Paul addressed it nearly two thousand years ago.

Now I beg you, brothers, through the name of our Lord, Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been reported to me concerning you, my brothers, by those who are from Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," "I follow Apollos," "I follow Cephas," and, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul?

1 Corinthians 1:10-13

The Corinthians were starting cults of personalities. Paul saw the dangers. By focusing on people, the believers were becoming divided: I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow John MacArthur, I follow John Piper, I follow R.C. Sproul. Bad. We are to follow Jesus Christ and Him only. Our focus is to be God's Word, the Bible. Certainly, God has given us teachers in the assembly, but they are to keep the focus where it belongs—on Christ and His Word, not *their* words. As Paul says in verse 17, "For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the Good News—not in wisdom of words, so that the cross of Christ wouldn't be made void." Surely, Paul doesn't mean that he didn't speak wisely, for this would mean he spoke foolishly. No. What he means is he didn't speak with worldly wisdom using polished oratorical techniques because this would blunt and distract from the central message of the Cross of Christ.
Paul continues:

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are dying, but to us who are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, I will bring the discernment of the discerning to nothing." Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the lawyer of this world? Hasn't God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For seeing that in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom didn't know God, it was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of the preaching to save those who believe. For Jews ask for signs, Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified; a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Greeks, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. For you see your calling, brothers, that not many are wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, and not many noble; but God chose the foolish things of the world that he might put to shame those who are wise. God chose the weak things of the world, that he might put to shame the things that are strong; and God chose the lowly things of the world, and the things that are despised, and the things that are not, that he might bring to nothing the things that are: that no flesh should boast before God.

1 Corinthians 1:18-29

All who attempt to preach and teach God's Word must be careful not rely on their technique so that they draw attention to themselves and distract from Christ and distort the simplicity of God's Word. Yes, there are Christian teachers, but they must not be like the wise of this world. They must not be like the world's writers (scribes), they must not use the speaking tricks and smooth words of the debaters and sophists (lawyers). God has made the wisdom of this world foolish, or like the speaking of morons (mōrainō). But God has, in fact, chosen those the world considers morons and low born (agenēs) and those who are from nothing (exoutheneō) so "that no flesh should boast before God" because—just as is our righteousness and sanctification and redemption—our wisdom is Christ Jesus.
Taking up this same topic again in 1 Corinthians 3, Paul points out,

For no one can lay any other foundation than that which has been laid, which is Jesus Christ. But if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or stubble; each man's work will be revealed. For the Day will declare it, because it is revealed in fire; and the fire itself will test what sort of work each man's work is. If any man's work remains which he built on it, he will receive a reward. If any man's work is burned, he will suffer loss, but he himself will be saved, but as through fire.

1 Corinthians 3:11-15

I can't help but think that an awful lot of wood, hay, stubble, seeker sensitivity, motivational speaking, prosperity gospel, self-help, positive thinking, works, and law-keeping are going to be burned. If the speakers have built these things on the foundation of Christ—that is, they trust in Christ as their Savior—the speakers will suffer loss but they themselves may be saved. But, in many cases, I am afraid that is a big IF.

We Have a Responsibility

When someone criticizes, or even questions, a popular Christian personality, he or she must expect that the personality's champions will retaliate. Most retaliations boil down to, "My hero is a wonderful Christian, so how dare you criticize him?"

We should not make personal, ad hominem, attacks on speakers and writers but we should test what they say. Why? Because all believers worldwide are members of God's ekklēsia, His assembly whom God has called out of this world. Speaking of how the meetings of the local assembly are to be conducted, Paul wrote, "Let the prophets speak, two or three, and let the others discern" (1 Corinthians 14:29). The word "discern" is diakrinō. Besides "discern," it means to judge, to make a decision about something. In other words, the members Paul wrote to were to determine, based on revelation they already had, whether what the speaker said was really inspired by the Holy Spirit, whether it was from God. If it contradicted what they already knew to be from God, then the speaker was speaking falsely.

We don't merely have a right to judge or criticize speakers. Each individual believer has the obligation to engage his own brain in
conjunction with the Holy Spirit and the Word of God (which every believer should be studying) to judge rightly what he hears spoken. When someone claims to be speaking as God's preacher or teacher in a larger venue than the local assembly, we have this responsibility as members of the ekklēsia of all believers. The responsibility is, perhaps, all the greater because popular speakers are reaching the general public and what they say can offend little ones or shame the name of Christ. Further reading: "What is the fruit by which we are to know people?" ([http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/matthew7qa.htm](http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/matthew7qa.htm)).

Every one of us has the responsibility to know the Scriptures as well as we can so that we can be discerning. In the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church tried to keep people ignorant of what the Bible said so the people would not be discerning and would believe whatever they were told. Even today, many false teachers prey upon ignorance.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is today well-loved in pop Christianity circles. I think this is largely because he was executed by the Nazis toward the end of World War 2. Unfortunately, this has made people less discerning than they should be. The German pastor and theologian taught many aberrant doctrines that make him a dangerous example to follow. But I specifically mention him now for his elitist view of who can understand the Bible: "Scripture belongs essentially to the preaching office, but preaching belongs to the congregation. Scripture must be interpreted and preached. In its essence it is not a book of edification for the congregation." (From Bonhoeffer's book, *Ethics*, as cited in the excellent introductory article, "The Troubling Truth About Bonhoeffer's Theology") ([http://www.equip.org/article/troubling-truth-bonhoefferstheology/](http://www.equip.org/article/troubling-truth-bonhoefferstheology/)). In other words, Dietrich Bonhoeffer believed that the Bible was not for the average Christian. Instead, the Bible was for the clergy, and the clergy were then to give their interpretation of the Scripture to the laity through preaching.

1 One of the reasons Christians admire Bonhoeffer is that they consider him to be a Christian martyr because the Nazi's executed him. But, as even this blog that is dedicated to Bonhoeffer admits, Bonhoeffer was not killed for preaching the Gospel but for participating in a plot to assassinate Adolf Hitler: "It was for his participation in this treasonous conspiracy that he was ordered hanged by the Gestapo. The Gestapo saw only his 'high treason'" ([https://bonhoefferblog.wordpress.com/2013/08/19/was-dietrich-bonhoeffer-a-martyr-for-jesus/](https://bonhoefferblog.wordpress.com/2013/08/19/was-dietrich-bonhoeffer-a-martyr-for-jesus/)). You might say that Bonhoeffer's faith led to his participation in the plot, which qualifies him as a Christian martyr. Yet, Jesus never tells us to take up our swords and follow Him, but to take up our crosses (Luke 9:23). If we are participating in violence, we are not following Jesus who was led as a sheep to the slaughter (Acts 8:32). (And see here: "Dietrich Bonhoeffer Was Not Considered a "Martyr" By His Own Church...").[https://bonhoefferblog.wordpress.com/2013/08/20/dietrich-bonhoeffer-was-not-considered-a-martyr-by-his-own-church/]
Bonhoeffer's view of Scripture is entirely contrary to the priesthood of the believer and the fact that Jesus is the only Mediator between God and man (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 5:10; 1 Timothy 2:5). Yet, many Christians seem to agree with Bonhoeffer's view instead of the Bible's. When they hear or read their favorite Christian superheroes, often quoting them on social media, without critically examining whether what the hero says agrees with the Bible, they are making that person their mediator to God's Word.

Further, when they become piqued over someone's criticism of their hero's interpretation simply because they trust their expositor to be right, they are giving that person the superhero attribute of infallibility. And when they go so far as to dismiss any possibility that their favorite could be a false teacher, they are making that man or woman into an idol.

In Part 2, the final installment of this article, we'll look at the spiritual origins of false teaching, whether it is right to publicly expose false teachers without first contacting them, and who determines what God's Word is really saying.