



LUTHERAN
CHURCH OF **HOPE**

By Pastor Merv Thompson

Pastor's Update

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"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

The late highly influential newscaster David Brinkley was once asked the foundational question, "What truly is news?" Brinkley's cryptic and in some ways arrogant answer was "The news is what I say it is." At the time he would have certainly included the other two news anchors, Walter Cronkite and Howard K. Smith in the mix. "The news is what we say it is. Whatever we chose to cover is the news, and whatever we do not cover is not news."

Today, of course, in one sense the news medium has been democratized. Instead of three venues there are now scores of them. With the development of technology, we can digest the news from an increasingly diverse myriad of options. But that does not change Brinkley's basic thesis. In fact arguably, it even strengthens it. For as we have increased the venues, we have found that many of them operate from a highly partisan point of view, and even more so the news becomes only what they say it is. Decisions on what is news seem to be mostly subjective, based on the point of view of the owner or the personalities involved.

If we had any doubts about the veracity of Brinkley's assertion, all we had to do was watch the cable news channels in recent weeks as they incredulously exploited the tragic saga of Anna Nicole Smith. In my opinion, this simply was not news. If she merited any coverage it would simply result in her being mentioned in passing, one more tragic ending to someone who found their "fifteen minutes of fame," to quote Andy Warhol. It is almost impossible to take these cable stations at their word that they are news channels when they have sold out almost completely to such a soap opera.

The unbridled truth is that Anne Nicole Smith had become a celebrity, and the media has become the primary purveyor of this "culture of celebrity." Ms. Smith was a celebrity because she was famous, she was famous because she was a celebrity. In addition, her story embodied the two most titillating dynamics in our society, money and sex. Thus she became the

poster child for what is wrong with the broadcast industry.

Unfortunately, an entire cottage industry has arisen around the worship of celebrity. Paparazzi stalk and harass every waking moment of some of the most prominent celebrities. Beginning with People Magazine, the entire broadcast and print industry seems to have sold out to the absurdities and banalities of such an enterprise.

Even politics has been invaded by the fascination with celebrity. In Minnesota we can claim with justifiable chagrin that we were the ones who elected Jesse (The Body) "religion is only for the weak minded" Ventura as governor. Now it appears that we are going from the ridiculous to the sublime by having a satirist from Saturday Night Live run for Senate. Terrific, just what we need are more celebrities.

Of course, we are not the only state that has voted for a celebrity. California has the classic anti-girlie man now running the state from the governor's office. It is probably only a matter of time before we will have a presidential election between the two most popular people in the world, Tiger Woods and Oprah Winfrey.

I did learn something during Governor Ventura's term that was most enlightening. When he agreed to referee a professional wrestling match for a fee of something like two million dollars, Minnesotans were rather appalled. But one commentator put it all in perspective when he said, "Our society today is so jaundiced, so dysfunctional, that what has happened is that the more outrageous a celebrity becomes, the more controversial, even the more immoral, the more money they make." There used to be a time when a celebrity needed to carefully nourish their public mage. No longer, now the more bizarre the celebrity becomes, the richer they get. Back to Anna Nicole for starters.

Just consider the list. Begin with sports: Dennis Rodman, Terrell Owens, Randy Moss, Bobby Knight,

Ron Artest, to be truly shocking, even OJ Simpson who recently was paid a million dollars to write a book. Or consider the culture as a whole, the more outrageous a celebrity becomes, the more money they make—Paris Hilton, Brittany Spears, Ann Coulter, Howard Stern, Donald Trump, Rosie O'Donnell, Madonna, Mel Gibson, Brad Pitt and Angela Jolie. One could even argue that Bill Clinton made far more money from his book and speaking tours because of his scandal in the White House.

I tend to think this preoccupation with celebrities is almost a new form of idol worship. When the Israelites in the desert were in a state of high anxiety, they built a golden calf. We have modernized this quest with the sacred cow. Many of these celebrities have nothing at all to do with anything that is important to us, but the media has decided that what they do is ultimately newsworthy. The news is what they say it is, and if they do not say it, it is not news.

What troubles me is how often the church seems to emulate the culture. There was an historian some years ago who documented how the most popular clergy over the past two centuries or so paralleled the most popular people in the secular world. In other words the celebrities. That would mean, of course, if the most recognized celebrities are those who are all over the broadcast media, then the same would be true for religious figures. Who are the religious celebrities today—Billy Graham, Robert Schuller, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, James Dobson, Charles Swindoll, and Rick Warren.

What is even more upsetting is that some of these celebrities, not all of them, seem to have learned the lesson I mentioned above that the more controversial they become, the more over the top they appear, the more money they make. Consider again Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggert, Ted Haggard, and Al Sharpton. The best way to always be in the public eye and to generate contributions is to be increasingly bizarre.

In this context, I am very glad to be a Lutheran. Mainline denominations are often caricatured as being relics, losing out the court of public opinion to evangelical and non denominational forces. However, this is one area we get it much more right than most others. For the most part, the most important center of leadership is not the personality of the pastor but the office. Pastors are called to an office by a

congregation, accountable to that congregation. There are very few instances where pastors have absolute authority. They are always subject to the governance and assent of the people.

In addition, Martin Luther gave us the marvelous concept of the priesthood of all believers. That is, every Christian in their baptism is called to be a minister. The pastor is one among many, everyone is a minister. Also a major focus of clergy and other leaders is that of being a "servant leader." A servant is not one who lords it over people, but who empties himself (or herself) taking the form of a servant. Not many servants become celebrities.

Now both the Roman Catholic Church and much of the evangelical Protestantism has often given clergy far more authority and power than is true in mainline churches. In fact this is one reason why so much sexual abuse took place in Roman Catholicism, there were few checks and balances. Also in many evangelical churches the primary focus becomes the personality of the pastor, not the office, and so that person can be above accountability. Read Ted Haggard at this point again. As I have mentioned before, I am very impressed how Rick Warren has handled his increasing celebrity status. He has turned his face toward Africa and solving poverty and disease, and gives 90% of his income to that end.

I believe the "culture of celebrity" is increasingly damaging to the psyche and health of nation and world. I hope that the church does not become so enamored with the ways of the world that it seeks to crown its own celebrities. Jesus did not call us to be celebrities, he called us to be servants, disciples, ministers. It's not about us, but about what God in Jesus Christ has done in the world.

The most important news in the world is not what the broadcasters say it is, it is what the Scriptures unfold to us. This is why we call it good news, Gospel. Come to worship where you will hear what is truly news, because God has given it to us. And we might even consider just turning off what passes for news in the culture.