

Celebrity Jeopardy, Pastor's Edition

Posted in Culture, Relevant Church

By Rev. Matt Marino



It is a game we find endlessly entertaining. It pays lavish cash gifts to the contestants – celebrity pastors long on speaking gifts and ego. Part of the appeal is that the game appears unscripted. In reality it is anything but: First come video-venue multi-sites...necessary because “our man” is “da man.” Then book deals complete with manipulated sales. 16,000’ homes? Of course. “An ox is worthy of its hire.” – That’s biblical. Financial transparency? Not in this game, Alex. And, as celebrity stature grows, church boards are re-filled, not with parishioners, but with the pastors of other megachurches. The final page of the script is to re-brand oneself from pastor to CEO. After all, a pastor can’t take three quarters of a million in “winnings” each year. For the IRS, however, “What is a CEO?” is the answer in the form of a question for the ambitious pastor.

Last summer, in a post entitled “When did evangelicals get popes?” I pointed out the ironic similarities between celebrity video-venue preachers and the papacy that Protestantism rose in protest against. Extending the irony has been Pope Francis’ humility this year in contrast to the growing list of celebrity pastor abuses...

This new generation of celebrity preachers do not disclose salaries. They play shady games with parishioner money. They plagiarize while exhorting others not to. They shamelessly teach even children to idolize them. They bully those who would question their bad behavior. This game turns people from parishioners to Svengali following fans and renders the faith foolishness to an increasingly unchurched culture.

Yes, any public figure draws criticism, and envy is an ever present human problem. However, when you have harmed so many through your teaching and lack of financial accountability that former staff and parishioners set up websites to warn others of you, perhaps it is time for us to change channels?

I am told that I should lay off – that celebrity turnstile church pastors are “making Jesus famous”? I say they are making themselves famous, Alex. Not to mention fabulously wealthy. And when someone viewing at home grumbles we are told by the studio audience that their success validates their ministry and that we should not dare to “raise a hand against God’s anointed” (1 Sam. 26:11).

I have also been told that this is a Philippians 1 issue of “whether their motives are false or genuine, the message about Christ is being preached...so I rejoice.” That, however, is Paul saying, “It doesn’t matter what happens to me.” This is much different. This is not a leader sacrificing his wellbeing for the extension of God’s Kingdom, it the systematic fleecing of the flock by celebrity CEOs. A more appropriate scripture would be the condemnation awaiting careless teachers (James 3:1).

I have my own answer in the form of a question: Did Jesus ask to be made famous or followed?

Like celebrity obsessed groupies, the flock willingly participates in their fleecing. They arrive at video-venues by the minivan full. Then stare like pre-teen girls waiting for a pay-per-view performance of “the Biebs” as they wait for the screen to tune in from across the continent...victims of sophisticated manipulations, emotionally steered to avoid the obvious questions.

Contestant: “I will take “idol worship” for \$200, Alex?”

Host: “A big lie, a big secret, and a big bully.”

Contestant: “What are Mark Driscoll’s, Steven Furtick’s, and Perry Noble’s books, salary, and treatment of their critics?”

There are tens of thousands of humble servants of God ascending pulpits and standing behind the table of the Lord every Sunday in churches small, large, mega and super-mega. Do your soul a favor, instead of being a consumer of the “show,” join one those humble folk in their humble work. Be a part of something that exercises financial transparency. Give your time, talent and treasure to a community that is about serving and reaching the world rather than the pastor. Your faith life should contribute to more than the Nielson ratings and “winnings” of the latest celebrity “CEO.”

Cut to theme music while contestants appear to be thoughtfully crafting their latest scripted answers.

How long will we remain glued to this show? Because the kingdom of God is not a game.