Sunday, August 10, 1980
GOD'S CELEBRITIES
Luke 4:1-13; James 2:1-9

According to the New Testament, Jesus faced three major temptations as he was beginning his public ministry. The first temptation was to turn stones into bread, thereby abolishing hunger and benefiting countless people. The second temptation was to jump off the top of the Temple in Jerusalem in public view of thousands of people without coming to any harm, thereby becoming an instant celebrity and so attracting the world's attention to what he had to say. The third temptation was to accept the kingdoms of this world from the hands of the devil and thereby have the power to set up a kingdom with himself as the ruler and where all people could live happily and prosperously ever after.

Jesus rejected all three temptations!

Now suppose there had been a fourth temptation — this time an offer of a network television series in prime time to proclaim and expound the gospel, or even better the offer of setting up an entire Christian television network where Jesus himself could appear in person each night, interview other guests and celebrities and have only Christian music and successful people on the programs.

Would this temptation have also been rejected by Jesus like the others? If so, why?

1. First of all, Jesus would turn down the offer because he always rejected celebrity status for himself, and television has a way of making celebrities out of people. Even when Jesus healed someone because of his love and compassion, he told the person to tell no one. He didn't want to become famous as a healer. He didn't want people following him for the wrong reasons. Jesus knew, in other words, that people following him merely because he was a celebrity would not change any one's life. He knew too that the tactics that can sell detergents are not the kind that can sell commitment to the Christian way.

2. Secondly, Jesus would turn down the offer of a network television series or the setting up of a Christian network because it would cast the Gospel and the church too much in the role of hustler.

In the process the meaning of the Christian faith is distorted, and we come to believe that the business we are in is nothing more than a giant advertising campaign for salvation.

Let's look at this more carefully. Ernest Dichter, generally acknowledged as the inventor of "image advertising," advised one of his associates that the best technique for selling is to paint for the customer a total picture of the kind of person he or she would like to be, and then make the person believe your product is a necessary part of that picture.

For this reason, for example, automobile ads display their product in the most unlikely places — on glistening beaches or in verdant meadows, all traces of tire tracks erased. Or the youthful Scotch drinker profiled in the latest glossy magazine is pictured in his study surrounded by hardback books, the shadowy interior revealing glimpses of Persian carpet, leather upholstery, healthy pot plants, chrome track lighting, an Aran Isle sweater and a registered retriever.

Most of us are aware of the purpose of such advertising and we can see through it. Yet catching on to the gimmick does not necessarily make us immune to the infection. We still often lust after the image in the picture.

So potent is the underlying concept of image advertising that the very people who decry its use in the marketplace of consumer goods unquestioningl1make use of it to sell their own ideologies and causes.

Certain feminists, for example, have found the most convincing way of converting women to their cause is through image advertising. They seek to replace the picture of the frumpy old maid who lives down the street and digs dandelions out of the lawn in rubber galoshes and her housecoat, with the snappy image of a career woman, dressed to the teeth, carrying a designer briefcase stuffed with airline tickets to Acapulco and birth-control pills. The fact that the old maid may indeed be more independent of the two is irrelevant, just as it is unimportant or forgotten that a high percentage of Scotch drinkers may be middle-aged slovenly failures.

The point is — too many people in our time actually believe that we do not need to be good in fact and in substance, but only be good in image. Image is confused with reality. Thus, persons running for office more and more are concerned with projecting the right image for gathering votes. It was this extreme emphasis on image that was part of the cause of Watergate. The belief in image is also why modern-day celebrities fascinate and intrigue so many people. They lust after the image which the celebrities project.

So it is that products and causes get image celebrities to implicitly or explicitly endorse them. The national political conventions therefore get as many celebrities on stage as possible. Sometimes it becomes ironic and ludicrous.

For example, the Republican National Convention wrote into its platform a strong plank on the importance of the stabi1ity of the fami1y. Yet the Convention had G1enn Campbell and his live-in girlfriend lead the convention in the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. The fact that Campbell was also three times divorced in addition to having a live-in girlfriend was forgotten. It's the upfront image that counts. The Democratic Convention which begins tomorrow will undoubtedly make the same kind of mistakes because of our worship of image and celebrities.

Think of what it would've meant however, if the National Convention had chosen a man or woman or couple who had faithfully been married for 50 years, names unknown, perhaps from some small town in Western Nebraska. Wouldn't that have been more honest and made more sense?

Unfortunately, the so-called Christian media more and more imitate and copy some of the worst features of our present culture. We are over-impressed with image and celebrities. Take a look at most so-called Christian self-help books, usually written by some kind of worldly celebrity. On the cover is a photograph of the couple who wrote it, grinning happily from their suburban lawn.

Or why does Cliff Barrows intone the final benediction to Johnny Cash's Easter Special filmed in Israel, from a book-lined study with a massive mahogany desk and a crackling fire? Let's be honest. For the same reason that Dewar's Scotch pays young professionals to pose in casually elegant surroundings? I'm really not so much worried about the secular world doing this, but it's wrong for the Christian Church to so quickly imitate it.

Why do we get so excited when a celebrity endorses the Christian faith? For that matter why are we impressed when a celebrity endorses anything. Are they experts on breakfast cereal, toothpaste, automobiles, or underwear?

I'm not blaming the celebrity; his or her religious faith may be as genuine or more genuine than ours. What we mistakenly assume is that if we accept Christ, then the same success will come to us as has come to the celebrity. That's what image advertising tries to tell us.

Or maybe we think because a certain celebrity has endorsed the Christian faith, it's ok for us. B. J. Thomas endorses Jesus as Bruce Jenner endorses cereal. Why shou1d one consume either Jesus or Wheaties just because a celebrity does? Why wouldn't the testimony of some nameless drug addict who through finding Christ has been able to overcome addiction have the same effect? Do Christian media events rely so heavily on famous converts because their experience is more authentic than that of the anonymous believer? Or is it just a gimmick to create interest?

In our Christian image advertising, the meek, the misfit, the poor in spirit, the suffering servant are not allowed in the picture.

The product that Christian advertisers are supposedly selling is Christ. Yet Christ is nowhere in the picture. If he were, it would severely limit the marketing potential of the picture. A man dying on a cross who also asks us to take up our cross and follow him doesn't sell very well. Any ad man knows there is no point in putting out a picture of a bottle of Geritol. Instead, the ad shows a picture of a youthful happy couple who attribute their wealth and success to Geritol.

3. Thirdly Jesus Christ would turn down the offer of a network television series or a Christian network, because he is not fooled or impressed by technique or celebrities or image. God's celebrities are quite different from the world's celebrities. One of the amazing things about the stories of Jesus in the New Testament is that an extraordinary number of intimate conversations between Jesus and individuals are recorded and each one is unique. He had a different answer for each seeker. Some he commanded to follow; others he told to go home. Never once did he distribute tracts containing either spiritual laws or plans of salvation.

Most of all, Jesus knew who God's celebrities were--the lonely widow he saw put two copper coins into the offering box, the leper, the crippled man, the thousands of unknown individuals who are faithful day in and day out, who keep their commitments and who treat other people with kindness and respect, no matter who they are or what the color of their skin or social background.

God's celebrities are individuals like the woman I told about in last Easter's sermon — a woman no one ever heard of until some survivors 0£ the Jewish death camps in Germany found her. Natalia Abramovitch provided shelter in her home in Poland for a Jewish family and thereby saved the life of one member of that family. She herself was put in prison for harboring Jews, but after the war finally found her way to this country and lived in poverty and obscurity in St. Louis, until rediscovered by the man whose life she had saved.

Natalia would never have been asked to be a guest on the PTL Television program or the 700 club. She's not that kind of celebrity.

God’s celebrities are also people like Andre and Magda Trocme who along with Eduard Theis and his wife, hid and sheltered dozens of Jews in a little town in France during 1940 to 1944. Such people help us to remember that even in the darkest chapter in our time there are those among us who see their lives as lent to be spent and who quietly, effectively and most often anonymously live out their Christian commitment even though it often brings suffering and sacrifice into their own lives.

God’s celebrities are millions of forgotten people as far as the world is concerned, people who are always willing and ready to reach out a helping hand and who never seek or want publicity for their efforts. God’s celebrities do most of their good deeds in secret. This means that each one of us can become a true celebrity as far as God is concerned. It means being faithful in the little things of life as well as the big.

In this world of the here and now we know who the world’s celebrities are. They get plenty of media attention — - too much!

However, the New Testament reminds us that as Christians and Church members we are not to be overly impressed by the world’s celebrities. Remember in the letter of James we read as part of the scripture lesson we are told -

“Show no partiality...if someone comes into the church with gold rings and in fine clothing and a poor person also comes in in shabby clothing, do not wake distinctions between the two. Treat all people as equals.” Amen.