



MONEY: ENDS & TRENDS

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Age of Celebrity: Eternity Abandoned for Fleeting Immortality

By Wilfred Hahn

Every year *Forbes* publishes its list of the top 100 celebrities. The magazine’s 2011 tally of America’s top celebrities provided the most recent snapshot of this ever-changing world of fame and fortune.



No doubt, some of these people would be recognizable to readers. The latest top-100 contenders collectively earned \$4.5 billion in 2010 (an average of \$45 million each). Some of them were newcomers to the list, such as Justin Bieber, the young 17-year-old heartthrob crooner who ranked 3rd. Others are long-time entertainers such as Oprah Winfrey (ranked #2, who is estimated to have earned \$290 million in 2010 and has a reputed net worth of over \$3 billion). There can be no doubt: Celebrity is big business.

A recent book, written by Jo Piazza (a former gossip columnist with the *New*

York Times) entitled *Celebrity, Inc.: How Famous People Make Money* examines how competitive and facile is this world of celebrity. Quoting her on what she names the “Hollywood Industrial Complex”: “[It is] an internecine web of businesses, all working to create value from everything a celebrity does. It includes agents, managers, and publicists, each in their own way creating new business models and revenue streams for the complex’s front line—the celebrities themselves. These individuals are constantly working to monetize everything in a celebrity’s life.”

But just what really is this concept of celebrity that is so revered in our world? Just who qualifies to be a



celebrity today? What is its purpose and benefit? We need to examine this phenomenon further. The answers to these questions provide some revealing observations about our times.

Worldwide fame will one day again have a purer focus. The day will come where “No longer will the fool be called noble nor the scoundrel be highly respected” (Isaiah 32:5, NIV).

The Rich and Famous

To be rich, you don't need to be famous. However, if you can become famous, you will certainly have an easier means of becoming rich. A review of the *Forbes*' list prompts some observations. For example, why is it that the president of the United States (this person being the head of the most powerful country in the world) did not qualify for the rarified company of the list? In fact, not one of the selected top-100 celebrities solved world hunger, discovered a serum that would end cancer, or brought world peace. Yet, celebrities are famous, held in awe, and chased by the paparazzi, holding people in thrall to just gain a glimpse of them.

The entire *Forbes* list, as far as we can tell, is comprised of entertainers, sports stars and authors. The most numerous on the list were singers. This may explain why so many people are smitten with the idea of attaining stardom by becoming a popular singer. There are today numerous “reality” TV shows that seek to identify the next star singer, the most popular of these being *American Idol*. Hundreds of thousands of people clamor to audition for these shows. The producers of these programs apparently believe that they are doing America a great service by finding the next star.

In reality, the *Forbes* list of celebrities provides a rather narrow American view of celebrity. The criteria for making this list include earnings levels, the number of press clippings, TV and radio appearances, front magazine covers, and, of course, Internet Web hits. While we can



conclude that fame today has very little to do with the greater world good, intelligence or, in fact, any real talent, it also embraces a much wider phenomenon than just entertainment. Fame is simply to be known by many people, whether for good, bad, virtuous or immoral deeds. In fact, to be infamous is to be famous. Anything is acceptable as long as it achieves the “15 minutes of fame” popularized by Andy Warhol's statement in the 1960s, “In the future, everyone will be world-famous for 15 minutes.”

Today, the vain hope of countless millions is that the god of ephemeral celebrity—though entirely capricious and brutal—will cast his favor upon them. Perhaps an uploaded YouTube video could go “viral” (attracting the attentions of millions of people as with Justin Bieber). Popular culture today is indeed taken up with the eternally-worthless distractions of “amusement” and “celebrities.” The topics of Truth, eternity, and the knowledge of the Lord have taken a distant backseat.

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Quest for Fleeting Immortality

The wide influence of “celebrity” and “fame” today is a mark of our era. While since the dawn of history, some people will have been more famous than others, “fame” and “celebrity” was never the prime object of titillation and business that it is today. In times past, people would become famous (and or feared) by virtue of their noteworthy deeds.

The Bible frequently uses the term “fame” in describing various people mentioned in the Old Testament. For example, “So the LORD was with Joshua, and his fame spread throughout the land” (Joshua 6:27). We read of Solomon that “his fame spread to all the surrounding nations” (1 Kings 4:31). Also, “[...] David’s fame spread throughout every land, and the LORD made all the nations fear him” (1 Chronicles 14:17).

Of course, were there no humans, there could be no celebrity nor fame. It is partly the phenomenon of being known by many people that creates celebrity. And to that end, modern technology has enabled its increase. Today, following the invention of photography, and through the means of many new media and communications platforms, people can become famous overnight. Some theorize that this all started with the spread of newspapers ... for exam-

ple, the first mass-audience newspaper launched in 1833, the *New York Sun*. Its innovation was to sell advertising, thereby reducing the cost of the newspaper and making it affordable for a wider audience. Now, the “ears and eyes” of a greater audience could feed the rise of great “fame.”

According to a study published by the University of Warwick, the modern “cult of celebrity” can be traced back further to 18th century Britain. Then, a massive increase in the number of newspapers gave rise to the public persona, whether in life or death. Actually, this began with the popularization of the obituary.

Quoting Dr. Elizabeth Barry, the author of the study, “The big change was the founding of *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, which was a secular publication, and from the 1730s onward it starts publishing obituaries of a really wide section of society.” For instance, the magazine would print obituaries of actresses and eccentrics who were then famous as much for their questionable private lives as for their public lives. As such, people from all walks of life could now become famous. This also began an era where criminals started to be famous.

Global Power of Fame and Celebrity

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But a world without Biblical values is likely to give its affections and adoration



to “celebrities” of an undeserving variety. The Bible is much more selective as to who is deserving of “glory.” After all, there is no direct correlation between celebrity and the merits of righteous fame and glory. Never does the Bible extol “fame” as an objective. Fame is only a state and not an assessment of character or righteousness. The world, on the other hand, tends to presume that if someone is famous, that this alone is sufficient affirmation of their worthiness.

If anything, the Bible teaches us to be motivated by something other than fame. Rather than being oriented to the approval of humanity, we are to look to God. Paul illustrated this perspective, saying, “Am I now trying to win the approval of human beings, or of God? Or am I trying to please people? If I were still trying to please people, I would not be a servant of Christ. (Galatians 1:10). No, in whatever we do, we do it not for the approval of the masses. In “[...] whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Colossians 3:17).

Thoughts to Ponder

Fame is treacherous for more than one reason. In the Old Testament, we learn how Israel misused its fame. “But you trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favors on anyone who passed by and your beauty became his” (Ezekiel 16:15).

The Bible speaks of a world in the last days that is smitten with self-love and fame. Says Paul. “[...] in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful [...], conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy 3:1-2, 4).

That the world would come to such a point of delusion that it would refuse to recognize the one and only true God—the Creator of All—to instead worship the Antichrist (the vessel of the Devil himself) is an indication of its perversions with respect to fame and worship. Says the Bible, “And all the inhabitants of the earth will fall down in adoration and pay him homage, everyone whose name has not been recorded in the Book of Life of the Lamb that was slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8, AMP).

Aldous Huxley foresaw just how such lunacy could come about, saying, “Assemble a mob of men and women previously conditioned by a daily reading of newspapers; treat them to amplified band music, bright lights .. and in next to no time you can reduce them to a state of almost mindless sub-humanity. Never before have so few been in a position to make fools, maniacs, or criminals of so many” (*The Devils of Loudun*, 1952).

It is God alone that is deserving of fame. In fact, God seeks to make a name for himself. “And who is like your people Israel—the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for himself, and to make a name for himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before your people, whom you redeemed from Egypt?” (2 Samuel 7:23; see also 1 Chronicles 17:21, Ezekiel 39:7).

“Give praise to the LORD, proclaim his name; make known among the nations what he has done” (Psalm 105:1). The day will yet come when the entire world will acknowledge that: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” (Revelation 5:12). (MC)

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