

Cult Following

Messenger Worship

By George Davis

EVERYONE wants to be spoken well of. That's normal, but there is often something beyond mere due honor that is paid men and women whom God has graced to bear a word in season to his body, and that is the idolatry of hierolatry: the worship of venerated saints or holy beings.

IT IS IMPORTANT on the outset to define the term "cult" as it is used in this article. I do not use the term "cult" to refer to dangerous, destructive religious groups. Nor do I refer to a wide range of new controlling and abusive religious movements. Neither do I refer to Christian groups that hold non-traditional beliefs, but of a type of cultic behavior that is common among believers. A cultish conduct encouraged even by some of the dearest saints.

What could I possibly mean?

I am referring to the open and unashamed worship of messengers--men and women whom God has graced to bear a word in season to his body. In some cases they have heralded revelation so deep and profound as to inspire the awe and admiration of many. Consequently many of them have become virtual legends in their time. So much so that they, whether intentionally or not, acquire a cult following--a number of people who follow them around, like "Grateful Dead" groupies, singing their praises. The cards and letters start pouring in. The invitations to speak increase in number. Due to the dynamic of the grace given them, they become high profile, and therefore increasingly sought out. They often write best selling books that, when circulated, give them an even wider scope of visibility. This also firmly attaches their name to the specific revelation being shared, which becomes their literary claim to fame. And so it is that many have unwittingly acquired a cult following. Many of these dear brothers and sisters do not actively seek a following, but neither do they discourage it. This is where the problem lies. Perhaps innocently, they do not understand that by their silence they encourage it.

EVERYONE wants to be spoken well of. That's normal, but there is often something beyond mere due honor that is paid these dear saints, and that is the idolatry of hierolatry: the worship of venerated saints or holy beings.

In Revelation 19:10, the apostle John, overwhelmed by the vision shown to him, fell at the feet of the messenger to worship him. The messenger was appalled and said, "See that you do not do that! I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

Several things are apparent here.

1. The problem: Worshipping the messenger

2. The twofold solution:

- A. A loving rebuke: "See that you do not do that!"

- B. Teaching or redirection: "I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy."

THE PROBLEM occurs when messengers, either man or angel, are revered beyond God and the message. However, this is only symptomatic of a larger, more sinister problem, one that could easily be solved. The complications persist when the venerated messenger(s) will not correct the situation, and remain center-stage, receiving recognition long after their task is over. It is noteworthy that the messenger to John did not mention his name, but referred to himself as "your fellow servant, and of your brethren." He did not see himself in any way as being above John. He reminded John that he was just a servant, a fellow servant. He used the term brethren to remind John that they both had the same Creator/Father, indicating that they were both born of the same parentage--he likewise was a creature.

In the following pages we will use the terms messenger worship or cult following interchangeably to describe the disorder that occurs when a messenger receives the praise due only to God, for what ever reason does not correct the situation, and is elevated to a saintly superstar status. Paul struggled with this continually. He desired that believers would think soberly--not regarding men above what is written (1Corinthians 4:6). He acknowledged the difficulty of sharing the revelation that the Lord had given him. "I forbear, lest any man should think of me above that which he

sees me to be, or that he hears of me" (2 Corinthians 12:6) In the sharing of the revelation, men were prone to exalt the messenger. They were inclined to think of Paul more highly than they should. This is the essence of messenger worship --the worshipping of angels (*aggelos*.) An *aggelos* is a messenger or envoy. Although *aggelos* most often applies to angelic messengers, it is used of human messengers as well. For instance, in Malachi 3:1 we read these words,

Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the LORD, whom you seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom you delight in: behold, he shall come, says the LORD of hosts.

The Hebrew word for messenger in the above passage is mal'ak {mal-awk'} [04397], which means *angel, messenger, or representative*. In this case it is referring to John the Baptist. John the Baptist had been thrown into prison, and it was there in Herod's dungeon that he sought reassurance. Therefore, he sent messengers (*aggelos*) to Jesus with a carefully worded question.

When the men had come to Him, they said, "John the Baptist has sent us to You, saying, 'Are You the Coming One, or do we look for another?'" And that very hour He cured many of infirmities, afflictions, and evil spirits; and to many blind He gave sight. Jesus answered and said to them, "Go and tell John the things you have seen and heard: that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the gospel preached to them. "And blessed is he who is not offended because of Me."

When the messengers (*aggelos*) of John had departed, He began to speak to the multitudes concerning John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? But what did you go out to see? A man clothed in soft garments? Indeed those who are gorgeously appareled and live in luxury are in kings' courts. 26 "But what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I say to you, and more than a prophet. 27 "This is he of whom it is written: 'Behold, I send My messenger (*aggelos*) before Your face, Who will prepare Your way before You.' 28 "For I say to you, among those born of women there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist; but he who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he." (Luke 7:20-28, NKJV).

We see in the above passage the common usage of the Greek word *aggelos*, here used not only of John but also of those men sent by John to inquire of Jesus. So we see that

John the Baptist is the mal'ak / aggelos Messenger. Moreover, that the same word aggelos used of angelic messengers is used here of both John and his disciples (see also James 2:25). Therefore we must conclude that an aggelos is anyone, angelic or human, sent by God to deliver a message. They are divine envoys. This means that the worshipping of angels (aggelos) mentioned in Colossians 2:18 would also include the undue exaltation, adulation, and veneration of even the most saintly among us. It does not necessarily apply only to the worship of angelic beings.

"My Messenger"

IN MANY WAYS John the Baptist is the ideal prototypical messenger. His faithfulness is nothing short of inspirational. We love to quote his famous words "He (Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Do we really know what these words mean? Do we know it on the level that John did? This is John's mission statement. It was his goal from the onset. Never had it entered his mind to establish and maintain a high profile ministry. When asked who he was he replied "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight the way of the Lord" (John 1:23). To John it was not important who he was.

From the shores of Jordan, where he first saw the One whose shoelaces he was not worthy to unloose, John never stopped heralding, he never stopped pointing, he never stopped directing the eyes and hearts of the hearers to Jesus. He never stopped saying, "Behold the Lamb of God" (John 1:36). But now it was time for John to decrease even further. His job was done and he saw the need to disappear--to get out of the way. He knew that if he stayed he would find himself in competition with Jesus, and that was not why he had come. He had come to prepare the way for one greater than himself. In fact, this wonderful quote, "He must increase, but I must decrease," was spoken in the context of this very thought.

Then there arose a dispute between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purification. They came to John and said to him, "[Rabbi, He \(Jesus\) who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified--behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!](#)"

They were tempting John, weren't they? They were trying to get him to get with the program. Couldn't he see that his ministry was failing? That people were no longer coming to him? Perhaps they were attempting to get John to hold a crusade--to do

something sensational to get his following back. John don't you see it! You are losing your following! Get up! Do something! Can't you see that all are coming to Him?

John's reply is teeming with significance.

John answered and said, "A man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven. You yourselves bear me witness, that I said, 'I am not the Christ,' but, 'I have been sent before Him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3: 25-30)

John began by reminding his disciples that "a man can receive nothing unless it has been given to him from heaven." He could not act independent of God's will. He could not rise to his feet and randomly promote himself. The eminence was given to Jesus, not John. That day when Jesus took the three up on the mount, where they saw Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus, it was not Moses and Elijah that the Father exalted. No! God said, "[This is my beloved Son: hear him](#)" (Mark 9:7).

John also felt it necessary to remind them that he was not the Christ. The only way that he could be on the increase was if he were. Because John was not the Christ, he must decrease, and this he did with joy. John acknowledged that he had (past tense) been sent before Christ. But that time was over.

John reminded his disciples what it was all about, when he said, "[He who has the bride is the bridegroom.](#)" John saw himself in the context of the traditional Hebrew wedding ceremony, as the friend of the bridegroom. Traditionally it was this friend's role to serve the groom by carrying love mail to the bride. By helping in any way he could to facilitate the union--to present her unmolested, as a chaste virgin, to the Groom. The friend of the bridegroom was the groom's most trusted friend. He would never molest the bride. He would never draw her to himself. She did not belong to him. He knew, as no other, that He that has the bride is the bridegroom.

The final act of the friend of the bridegroom was on that long awaited night when the groom would come to steal the bride away. When she would hear the cry, "The bridegroom comes, and go out to meet him." Then she would be swept away to the house that the Groom had been long preparing.

The friend of the bridegroom would follow at a distance. And when the groom would take the bride into the bridal chamber, the friend of the bridegroom drew near. Standing just outside the bridal suite, he listened to the sound of lovemaking. At the first note of joy in the Bridegroom's voice the friend of the Bridegroom would dance and shout for joy. This is what he had been waiting for! This fulfilled his joy. And then, his job being over, the groom's most trusted friend would turn and walk away. He had done what he had come to do. He had seen the joining of the bride to the Groom. He had presented her unmolested to the Bridegroom.

So we see in John the perfect messenger, the one that God called "My messenger."

May God help us to be such friends and messengers! What would have happened if John had refused to decrease? I trust the Holy Spirit to make any further applications here.

Worthy of double honor

Without getting bogged down in another word study, allow me to explain the difference between honor and worship as I see it. We are all called to honor our parents, but we are not called to worship them. Likewise there is something of honor that we give each other as brothers and sisters in the Lord. We yield deference to one another as the Father elects to use this one or that. Who the messenger is matters little. In this way we honor God's workmanship in one another, and are constantly reminded that we are in that sense interdependent. But when we begin to give to the messenger what belongs to God, we cross over from honor into messenger worship. Like the apostle John, many fail to see that the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy, and in so doing, begin to worship the messenger. Messenger worship occurs when anyone, in whatever degree, unwittingly imputes to a messenger the attributes God. In failing to see the Lord in the messenger--to hear His voice and to see that the messenger is but a creature, the handy work of God, a mere vessel of clay--they fall short of the fulfillment of [1 Corinthians 1:31](#), "[He that glories, let him glory in the Lord.](#)"

Yes, we should yield to the voice of God as he speaks through messengers, even if the messengers are little children. Has God ever spoken to you through your children? When we are able to hear the Father's voice through whatever vessel He chooses, and not be enamored or disgusted with the one who bears the message, then we are showing at least some signs of maturity.

Jesus said "My sheep recognize my voice; I know them, and they follow me" (John 10:27NLT). Christ's sheep listen for his voice and they will hear no other. They recognize Christ's voice, whether directly, Spirit to spirit, through circumstances or in messengers. It is Christ's voice they hear, not the voice of another. This is as it should be.

Most often the Lord speaks to me Spirit to spirit--His Spirit bearing witness with mine. However, He has also spoken to me through untold numbers of precious brothers and sisters, for which I am exceedingly grateful. I am deeply appreciative of your faithfulness to Jesus. I heard our Lord's voice in you. At times you were totally unaware that you were speaking a word prophetically from our Father's heart to mine. And though I could not possibly remember all your names I am very grateful for your faithfulness to the Father and the direct effect your faithfulness has had upon my life. Thank you! I honor you! And to those of you whom I have not met, who in days to come will be so used, I thank you in advance!

On the other hand, there have been those of you who wanted to be the sole voice of God in my life. You fully expected to have the final say as to what God was telling me. You tried to tell me what I could and could not believe. You could not abide diversity. Therefore, you expected everyone to conform to your unique perspective. In some cases you insisted that you be referred to with titles of honor, such as "Reverend, Pastor, Apostle, Prophet" or any number of other honorifics. Sometimes you wore special clothing, such as robes, suits and cleric vestments, designed to set you apart as unique and aloof from the rest. I do not honor you! Nor do I often hear my Father's voice in you.

I in no way ascribe to the "just Jesus and me" mentality, that in effect says to the rest of the body of Christ, "I have no need of you." Neither do I ascribe to the present disorder where the inner witness of the Spirit is usurped by the synodal counsels of men, who attempt to force upon all God's children a one-size-fits-all orthodoxy. If we fail to see and hear the Father in the messengers He places in our lives, and consequently attribute to them what rightly belongs to God, we run the risk of mistakenly worshipping the creature more than the Creator (Romans 1:25), and may become the leader of someone's fan club. I am of Paul, I am of Apollos is the essence of messenger worship--attributing the glory of God to mere messengers.

Dear brothers and sisters, when you sense that you are being idolized--that you are being regarded with blind admiration and devotion, and are acquiring a following, a fan club, a cult following, issue that loving rebuke, "See that you do not do that!" Remind them that you are only their fellow servant, and their brother/sister. Exhort them to worship God--to hear the voice of Jesus and to follow Him. Allow God to speak through you, but don't take His followers to yourself . And what ever you do, don't receive their praises, lest you should be "exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations" (2Corinthians 12:7).

My prayer for all is that God would give us wisdom in these matters--a wisdom that renders to God the things that are God's (Mark 12:17).