

Publishing Editor's column

LAST MONTH I referred to the common use of the word 'idol' with reference to stars of the entertainment and sporting world, and suggested that this use of the word does not get to the essence of idolatry. Nevertheless, the attention given to such people is one of the many undesirable features of our modern world. I buy a newspaper from a local shop most days and cannot help noticing from the front pages of newspapers and magazines the inordinate amount of attention given to them.

This modern preoccupation with celebrities goes beyond taking an interest in their activities and lifestyles. A recent survey discovered that three out of every four women feel they should make efforts to look like the glamorous women that are so often portrayed by the media. This is perhaps not too surprising. Judging by the front pages of popular newspapers, many men must daily ogle pictures of young and attractive women, which must leave their wives and girlfriends feeling inferior and needing to compete for attention. And judging by the front pages of magazines, women are continually being shown not only the lifestyles of the rich and famous but also how they can imitate them.

All this has a consequence. By their own admission, lots of money is being spent by women on beauty products, hair styling, and so on, in an effort to match celebrities. According to the survey referred to above, based on what women themselves say, over four billion pounds a year is spent on such things. This survey was of women only, but men are, of course, increasingly spending money in an endeavour to look like the famous too. This is big business, but sadly it is the more vulnerable members who are most affected by all this—the young, the poor and the less well educated—with even children being subjected to pressures to try to look like their idols.

All this leads to widespread unhappiness, disappointment and disharmony that could be avoided by taking notice of Scripture, which tells us that it is not appearance that matters but character, and it is not what others think of us that is important but what God thinks of us. The words of God to Samuel when the sons of Jesse paraded before him illustrate this: "the LORD seeth

not as man seeth; for man looketh on the outward appearance, but the LORD looketh on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). Peter urges wives to concentrate on the cultivation of "the hidden man of the heart . . . the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit", rather than the "outward adorning" of hairstyles, clothes and jewellery (1 Pet. 3:4,3). Brethren and sisters both have a responsibility here, both in what they aspire to themselves, and in what they look for in others.

When celebrities are termed 'idols', the predominant thought is of them being people who are much admired, perhaps for their appearance and lifestyles, but more especially for their abilities. They are spoken of as 'role models', to be imitated as well as admired. Yet very often they are vain and shallow people, with behaviour far from admirable, even by normal standards, let alone the much higher standards of Scripture. The other side of the coin to the adulation they receive is the enormous interest in their private lives, with the media eager to seize upon scandal to titillate prurient minds.

In previous times it was very different. Those most admired were leaders, political and military, or those prominent in good works. Today much effort is devoted by biographers to exposing the weaknesses and faults of such people, and it is no longer fashionable to admire them. If we want to look back in time for people to admire we can, however, go to Scripture, where we can be sure to find an accurate picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the characters portrayed there, and can seek to imitate their good points and learn from their weaknesses.

If we are looking for the perfect role model, one who was truly admirable in all that he did, we shall, of course, find only one, the Lord Jesus Christ. Yet of his appearance it is said of him: "he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him" (Isa. 53:2). Though many sought to discredit him, he was able to say: "Which of you convicteth me of sin?" (Jno. 8:46, RV); and Pilate declared to the Jews who wanted to get rid of him: "I find in him no fault at all" (18:38). Here indeed is a truly worthy role model, one whom we can, and indeed must, seek to imitate in our daily lives.

Tony Benson