

The Kingdom - showing the character of Christ—not a culture of celebrity

- [Insights Magazine](#)
- [Thu, 15th June 2023](#)

I recently watched the SBS documentary entitled The Kingdom. The story that was told in the documentary, The Kingdom, canvassed recent events relating to Hillsong, and included interviews and visits to other Pentecostal churches in both Australia and the United States of America.

The documentary had a clear thread running throughout, of how a person found acceptance and support within the Pentecostal world. Marc Fennell, who narrates the documentary, offers a very personal testimony of his involvement, throughout his childhood, in Hillsong and “a number of other Pentecostal churches”, until the point, 17 years ago, when he decided that this was no longer for him. He left—the first time he set foot back into a Pentecostal church was during the making of this documentary.

The honesty of the personal angst of Fennell runs through the documentary, giving it authenticity and integrity. He was exploring Hillsong from the vantage point of a person who had known very well what the experiences of worship and participation was like. He made it clear how important to him was the support and friendship of people within the churches he attended, especially since his family situation was apparently rather difficult. Fennell was loved and valued by people at Hillsong and other churches—even though, in his innermost being, he was not able to enter into the intense emotional experience of Pentecostal worship.

There are moments of pathos in the documentary, as Fennell offers personal revelations about his own spirituality. He showed great courage in what he decided to say in this very public national forum. (The documentary was broadcast by SBS and remains able to be viewed [on SBS On Demand](#).)

Woven in and through this personal thread is another, more dominant, thread, which becomes the reason for making the documentary. The failures of Hillsong have become known, piece by piece, over the past four years. Like any church—like any organisation run by, and for, human beings—there will always be problems, brought about by the deficiencies of people involved, and in some cases by the deliberate efforts of some to benefit personally. All human organisations are fallible.

In Hillsong’s case, however, those deficiencies were magnified by the way that key leadership operated. A particular culture was created, which exploited people. It is true that many people have been helped by the ministries of Hillsong, to a greater or lesser degree, over the years. Many (myself included) have enjoyed singing and playing some of their better songs. But many also have been hurt and exploited by leaders in Hillsong in that same period. The culture that was created was toxic and abusive for far too many people.

I was waiting, throughout the documentary, to hear how Fennell would describe the culture that was fostered within Hillsong. He touched on a number of bad elements in the way that Hillsong operated. Abuse of volunteers was canvassed early on. The “Prosperity Gospel” push to encourage participants to tithe—and to give beyond that tithing so that it hurt them financially—was examined. Accusations of fraud perpetrated by those with access to the finances of the organisation was discussed, including money laundering and tax evasion.

Eventually, the documentary came to identify the issue that had most strongly been reported by mainstream media: various sexual encounters by people in leadership, and the infidelity of key leaders, both in Sydney and elsewhere around the world. (Hillsong is a “global phenomenon”.) The paedophilic abuse perpetrated by Frank Houston, the founder of Hillsong (in the days when it was known as the Christian Life Centre) was also reported, and there is a court case involving his son, Brian, that is ongoing.

So the documentary gave some hints to what I consider to be the key to all of this: the culture of celebrity which permeated the organisation, from the onstage worship leaders, musicians, and preachers, through the pastoral workers, even to some the financial and administrative workers.

All that the leadership of Hillsong seemed concerned about was to focus on ensuring that “the experience” of Hillsong was fabulous, and that it grew month by month and year by year. Growth in numbers was the key metric, indeed (so it seems) the only metric. The way to ensure that growth was by providing ever-increasing endorphin hits of pleasure. And celebrity was the way to generate enthusiasm and maintain the growth trajectory. So a culture of celebrity was nurtured.

All of this, of course, is contradictory to the Gospel that Jesus preached and lived. He advocated humility; “blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth”, not “build up your leaders to be seen as grand and exciting figures”. He instructed people not to store up wealth on earth; “sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor”, not “call for tithes and more to fund an increasingly extravagant lifestyle of the leaders”.

Jesus encouraged his disciples by saying “whoever welcomes a child in my name welcomes me”, not “see children as potential targets for grooming and sexual abuse”. This is the character of Christ that we know from the Gospels. This is the culture that churches should seek to emulate.

The documentary is being widely applauded as being “a pretty fair treatment”, as “balanced” in how it reports on Hillsong. I have seen it described as “thoughtful”, which it was; as “honest”, which I agree it was. But my sense is that it lacks a critical lense on the whole phenomenon, from the point of view of faith (and by this, I mean faith as Jesus taught and lived it, not how Hillsong portrayed it).

A critical theological assessment is really needed—and Marc Fennell is not able to provide this, because he is explicitly NOT a believer and certainly does not have theological training.

So my sense is that the title, *The Kingdom*, invites people of faith to reflect further. Whose Kingdom? Fennell posed this question in terms of “who inherits the Hillsong mantle?” What Pentecostal churches are manoeuvring to fill the gap that is opening up, as people leave

Hillsong? Whilst that's a worthwhile question to explore, that's not what "The Kingdom" implies to me.

The Kingdom was what Jesus proclaimed. The Kingdom was what he taught in his parables. The Kingdom coming near was the message that he gave to his disciples, for them to spread far and wide. And what was that Kingdom? A realm in which God's compassion and justice would be known and experienced and lived.

In this realm, outsiders are to be welcomed—children, those marginalised, those challenged by life, and people identifying somewhere within the LGBTIQA+ spectrum, and placed them at the centre. A place and a time where relationships would be genuine, empathic, and nourishing. A place and a time marked by the characteristics of Christ.

It's in relation to this final observation that I have one more comment. Nothing in the documentary indicated the discriminatory way that Hillsong has dealt with LGBTIQA+ people. There have been high profile instances of such people being removed from leadership positions. The church is not "gay-friendly". I can only presume that there are other instances of discriminatory behaviour directed towards LGBTIQA+ people which have not received publicity. Omitting mention of this is a deficiency in how Hillsong was presented in the documentary.

All in all, I join my voice with others who have said, about the documentary, The Kingdom: yes, watch this. It is worth devoting time to see it. But watch it with critical eyes. Watch it with the knowledge of who God is, how Jesus speaks about God, and what God's Kingdom is like.

Watch it, and weep. Weep for those abused and ostracised. Weep for those conned by the culture of celebrity. Weep for those struggling to rebuild lives and faith after traumatic experiences. Watch it with eyes wide open, hearts reaching out, and faith in the Kingdom into which Jesus invites us all to share. For this Kingdom will exude the character of Christ.

The Kingdom is streaming now [on SBS On Demand](#).

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