

CELEBRITIES FOR JESUS

**HOW PERSONAS,
PLATFORMS,
AND PROFITS
ARE HURTING
THE CHURCH**

KATELYN BEATY



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PART 1

BIG THINGS FOR GOD

Social Power without Proximity

When I accepted Jesus into my heart in 1998, in response to a gospel message at a youth rally at a local church, I had no idea what that event meant or the history it ushered me into. I just knew that I wanted to stand for Jesus—literally stand, as the speaker invited us to do. As a thirteen-year-old, I distinctly remember wondering what the boys in our youth group would think if I stood up from my seat, if they would call me a “dork” (the worst thing I could imagine at the time). But a stirring in my young, open spirit compelled me to stand no matter the cost. Riding home in the back seat of my parents’ car that night, my heart felt warm, aglow with something new. It was like the strange warmth that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, described experiencing after hearing a sermon on the book of Romans another world away.

The day after, I wrote in my journal, “I went to a Geoff Moore and the Distance concert on Saturday and it brought me a lot closer to God. . . . I think it saved me, or already made me realize I was saved. I’m glad I went.”

I didn’t know about John Wesley at the time, but it was fitting that my Christian conversion echoed his. Our family had attended United Methodist churches during my upbringing, as we moved every few years for my dad’s military career. In 1996, we began attending a different kind of church: a “seeker sensitive” congregation in southwest Ohio. Mimicking popular megachurches like Willow Creek and Saddleback, it featured guitars during worship and simple sermons that often drew from pop culture. Our pastor wore open-toed sandals. His messages were simple, relevant, and positive. The approach was working: membership was growing, and the church was building a new worship center/gym featuring video screens on the walls. It was a UMC church, but nothing about our life together signaled to me that we were part of a tradition going back to Wesley. I had no idea we were part of an ecclesial institution with more than 12 million members in 32,000 churches across the globe.

Famous Christians were fixtures of my adolescence. After I came to Christ, I was introduced to musicians, speakers, pastors, and authors who would form my burgeoning faith, even though my only relationship to them was that I purchased their albums and books and heard their messages on a stage far away. This was the late 1990s and early 2000s, arguably the peak of evangelical youth culture. We learned we needed to stand apart from secularists who were forcing prayer out of public schools and filling young minds with *American Pie* and Britney Spears. Instead of questioning mainstream celebrity culture, though,

Christians had overall mimicked it. Secular culture had its celebrities, but so did we. DC Talk made edgy music videos that looked and sounded like Nirvana. Rebecca St. James was our Alanis Morissette, although all her angst seemed to be about retaining her sexual purity. Gospel artist Kirk Franklin had a crossover hit with “Stomp,” with the lyrics “I can’t explain it, I can’t obtain it / Jesus your love is so, it’s so amazing” blasting on the local top 40 radio station after Puff Daddy.

And the Newsboys drummer had a revolving drum set. A *revolving drum set!*

The strategy of swapping out secular celebrities for Christian ones was overt. At the 2000 Acquire the Fire conference, before thousands of teenagers packed into a stadium in Muncie, Indiana, Teen Mania founder Ron Luce told us to trade our profane CDs for their Christian alternatives. Like Blink-182? Listen to Five Iron Frenzy instead. Ditch the Mighty Mighty Bosstones for the W’s. Sixpence None the Richer was okay, as long as we understood that “Kiss Me” was about Christ’s love for the church. The lesson was that Christian youth could be cool and that the Contemporary Christian Music industry had produced the stars for us to emulate and identify with during our formative years.

As I grew up, I was also introduced to Christian authors pushing back against the rising tide of secularism coming for the country’s politics and schools. At age twenty-one, Joshua Harris was thrust into the national limelight by making a stand for chastity and traditional courtship in his 1997 bestseller, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*. Ravi Zacharias and Lee Strobel, famous international apologists, wrote scores of books making the case that Christianity was intellectually sound. We even had a Christian celebrity emerge from the 1999 Columbine shooting:

Cassie Bernall, who was alleged to have said yes when her killers asked if she believed in God. She and fellow victim Rachel Scott were hailed by Christian media and publishers as modern martyrs.

I didn't know it at the time, but these and other figures were part of a vast constellation of personalities who defined the evangelical movement in the late-modern West—much more so than did the vast expanse of church history, the creeds, or denominations. Later on, I'd learn that celebrity is a feature, not a bug, of the contemporary evangelical movement. However one traces the unwieldy history of evangelicalism—unwieldy precisely because of its decentralized nature—one finds a dynamic spiritual movement of Christians sharing the gospel using the tools at their disposal in a specific cultural context. Paul the apostle had shared the gospel using the tools of reason and philosophy in the marketplace of the Areopagus. He writes in 1 Corinthians, “I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some” (9:22). In a mass media culture driven by visual appeal, slick marketing, and personal branding, celebrity is just one more tool Christians have used to reach people for Christ.

Indeed, many Christians have used their fame, passion, and tech savvy for good kingdom purposes, sharing the gospel via mass media culture, whose global reach Paul could only have dreamed of. As far as we can tell (not knowing their inner lives), many famous Christians stand on these large platforms with integrity. To them, celebrity is one tool used to build the house of God—not the house itself. They're willing to part with their fame or prestige if it no longer serves primary kingdom purposes.

But other Christians have reached for the tool of celebrity and found that it isn't really a tool at all. It has more power

over the user than the user has over it. It turns out to be a wild animal—cunning, slippery, and insidious. And that wild animal is now tearing up the house of God from the inside out.

Fame's Virtues

What are we talking about when we talk about celebrity? For a society fixated on status, image, and influence, you'd think we would have a better grasp of the celebrity dynamic. But the very nature of celebrity, especially in a digital era, is that it hides its power behind the illusion of intimacy. We need to look back to see how celebrity came to be at once ubiquitous and elusive.

Celebrity is a distinctly modern phenomenon fueled by mass media. Before that, we had fame, and we've always had it. Every age has featured individuals whose position, accomplishments, or political might have carried their name far beyond a single time and place. To be famous is to be known—or at least known *of*—by far more people than you can ever know. Fame almost always includes a differential of power.

Fame has often been an accident of birth, of bearing the right name or being born into the right family. Indeed, for much of history, fame has had more to do with your last name and your clan than with your accomplishments. Today, many of us follow with fascination the British royal family's inner dramas or scoff at the notoriety that comes simply from being born or marrying into the House of Windsor. Either way, the royal family captures how fame has often worked in times past. The queen is famous simply for being the queen—for who she is and the institutional and cultural power she represents, not really for her personality, talents, or Instagram game.

In a meritocracy like America (a meritocracy in theory, at least), fame often comes from what you do—skill, innovation, or accomplishment. Americans celebrate this kind of fame: the person of humble beginnings whose hard work and creativity have improved our lives or enriched our imaginations. Our national mythos rewards individuals for rising up from ordinary circumstances and wielding their talents and creativity to make our lives better. George Washington Carver and his peanuts. Walt Disney and his little whistling mouse. Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak tinkering away in their garage. Americans instinctively believe that fame should be the reward for actually *doing* something. If someone is “famous for being famous,” that is not a compliment.

Framed in a positive light, fame often arises from the desire to make something of our lives that will extend past our time on earth. Fame is connected to the innate human desire to create something that will last beyond ourselves, blessing or inspiring future generations. Creating culture is at the heart of bearing God’s image; as humans, we can’t help making culture. When we make culture well, in a way that benefits our neighbors or alleviates their suffering, sometimes we garner a kind of fame. We become known for being good neighbors in the public square. We become like the *tsaddiq*, a Hebrew word in Scripture meaning “the righteous”—people who are known in a community for personal integrity, generosity, and societal transformation.¹

The right kind of fame arises from a life well lived, not a brand well cultivated. At its best, fame is a by-product of virtue, the effect rather than the goal of living a virtuous life. When we live as people who love well, serve sacrificially, pursue truth and justice, put others ahead of ourselves, and make the

most of our time on earth, sometimes other people notice. Yet people of virtue, the *tsaddiq*, hold loosely any acclaim that might come their way. They share its power rather than hoard it. For virtuous people, fame—and any prestige and wealth that might come with it—is not the main thing. They are able to part with it as soon as it distracts from their primary goal of creating or leading well.

Fame is at its finest when it comes to those who are not seeking it.

Rosa Parks wasn't seeking fame when she refused to give up her seat to a white passenger on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. She was tired from a full day of work as an in-house seamstress at a department store. She was tired of being treated as a second-class citizen and second-class human under Jim Crow laws. She was tired of her black, female body being another locus for centuries of oppression and objectification against fellow Americans. For all of this, she was bone tired.

Parks's refusal to move for a white passenger on that December day gave fresh energy to the civil rights movement, inspiring the young minister Martin Luther King Jr. and other leaders to organize the Montgomery bus boycott, considered the first mass civil rights protest. She and others faced jail time and fines; her action could have cost her her life. There was a great risk involved in taking a stand by continuing to sit. Parks's act wasn't an open door to speaking engagements or book deals. She defended her and others' dignity and legal rights, and public attention and renown were the by-products of her virtue. Five decades later, when asked about her legacy, Parks said, "I would like to be remembered as a person who wanted to be free and wanted other people to be also free."²

The best famous people are the ones who seem to think about fame the least. Many of us can likely think of artists, teachers, government leaders, clergy, or business owners in our local communities who have gained renown because of how well they lead and serve. Of course, even on a national scale, many contemporary Christian leaders are household names presumably not because they set out to be, but because a mix of timing, talent, and the tools of media delivered their stories into our homes and hearts.

So, fame itself is not sinful. We shouldn't assume famous people, including famous Christians, are inherently shallow, power hungry, or hiding deep, dark secrets behind closed doors.

Scripture includes stories of God granting renown to certain figures to accomplish God's purposes throughout history. Esther is a striking example of a biblical figure who used fame and social power for godly purposes. She didn't start out famous—anything but. Hadassah/Esther was an orphan adopted by her cousin, Mordecai. As an Israelite teenager, she was chosen by Ahasuerus, king of Persia, to be his wife. She had little standing to resist the advances of the ruler of the largest empire of the day. After marrying the king, she could have settled into her new, glamorous life, enjoying the accoutrements of palace living and being the most beautiful young woman in all the land. Instead, she used her newfound proximity to power to plead for the powerless: to protect the lives of her Jewish people. Because of her pleading on their behalf, for the Jews “it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor” (Esther 8:16). Esther was granted some fame and made good on it, becoming more renowned for saving the Jewish people than for being the king's trophy wife.

We might also think of the instructional role of the saints. In many church traditions, saints are revered beyond their lifetimes

for singular lives of holiness, service, and sometimes martyrdom. The Protestant and evangelical traditions have their own ways of remembering godly, prominent women and men. (If you doubt this, just visit the Billy Graham Museum in Wheaton, Illinois.) As a good Protestant, I think I'm supposed to say that all of us are saints—that because of Christ, all of us deserve to be honored equally. But it's simply the case that some of us “run the race marked out for us” with remarkable speed and grace; others of us—many of us—seem to limp to the finish line hobbling on one foot. It is right and good to honor Christians who run the race of faith well, because they inspire and instruct those of us who are still running.

Here's the trick: The vast majority of us will run our own races in ordinary, unglamorous ways, off the stage and off the screen. Almost all of us will live and die being known and loved (if we are lucky) by a small circle of friends and family—the people whose connection to us is deepest and most lasting because it was formed in daily, embodied, humble ways. For every famous saint, there are millions of ordinary ones. Ordinary people are the primary way God has worked in and through the world over the centuries.

More and more, though, it seems that a lot of us aren't content to be ordinary Christians.

Known for Well-Knownness

Celebrity is fame's shinier, slightly obnoxious cousin. It shows up to the family reunion in a Tesla, expecting a red-carpet roll-out. It will definitely share the whole thing on Instagram Live.

The word “celebrity” traces back to the Latin *celebritas*, meaning “multitude, fame.” It comes from the Old French for

“rite” or “ceremony,” thus carrying a sacred, even religious connotation.³ Simply put, a celebrity is someone who is widely celebrated. But celebrity is different from fame—and arguably more damaging—in at least two ways.

First, celebrity feeds on mass media. Celebrity is a uniquely modern phenomenon, spurred throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, first through newspapers, then magazines, radio, film, television, the internet, and social media. Together, these media bring us into contact with “a vastly larger number of names, faces, and voices than at any earlier period or in any other country.”⁴ We feel connected to the names, faces, and voices on our screens—even though the connection is ultimately to a projection of a self rather than a true self. Mass media gives us the illusion of intimacy with famous people we follow and admire.

The primary functions of mass media are to entertain us and to get us to buy things. Thus, modern celebrities—including those in the church—feed the cycles of entertainment and material consumption. The tools of mass media, such as the screens in my church when I was growing up, are not neutral. As soon as an image of your pastor is projected onto screens across multiple sites, your church is borrowing from the worlds of entertainment and consumption, whether intentionally or not. The pastor on the screen is no longer just an expositor of the Word but someone we expect to entertain us or to sell us things. (Especially if the pastor has a book; more on that in chap. 5.)

Modern celebrities are often icons of success and wealth, and many are more than happy to have their names and faces co-opted to support our favorite brands. Michael Jordan might be the greatest basketball player of all time, but he is also one of

the greatest company spokesmen, having earned an estimated \$1.3 billion since first signing with Nike in 1984.⁵ Nike's deal with Jordan wasn't just about selling shoes; it was also about selling us a vision of greatness. If you wear Air Jordans, maybe you'll play basketball like him too. Likewise with cosmetic companies, which sign deals with actresses to sell women the myth of eternal beauty. If Julianne Moore looks that great in ads for L'Oréal, maybe you'll look that great if only you buy this new antiaging skin cream.

A peculiar facet of celebrity is how manufactured it is—and it didn't start with Kim Kardashian. In his seminal work of 1962, historian Daniel Boorstin writes:

The celebrity is a person who is known for his well-knownness. His qualities—or rather his lack of qualities—illustrate our peculiar problems. . . . He has been fabricated on purpose to satisfy our exaggerated expectations of human greatness. . . . He is made by all of us who willingly read about him, who like to see him on television, who buy recordings of his voice, and talk about him to our friends.⁶

A celebrity is known for their well-knownness—and we feed the problem. Boorstin highlights the artifice of modern celebrity: it is bought and sold through the channels of mass media as a good to be consumed. We don't always know *why* we're supposed to know who someone is, just that we should. It's similar to fame, but it doesn't require doing anything of particular importance, talent, or virtue. In this way, celebrity is often a shortcut to greatness.

It's an increasingly easy shortcut to take. Over the past decade, social media has democratized the celebrity pipeline,

giving users the tools to project their image to untold followers, often with lucrative results. When I check Instagram, I am bombarded with content from “influencers,” some with millions of followers. Social media influencers offer their followers “content” that is “relatable,” yet almost certainly commissioned and created by professional photographers. They appear well lit and well dressed, stirring envy or aspiration. Even so, they assure us that their lives are just as normal and messy as ours. They offer candid snapshots into their daily lives, even though the actual content of their daily lives is lived off camera and can’t in fact be truly known by anyone scrolling by. We seem to be okay with that, though; we’re happy to consume the false intimacy.

The youngest generations are especially drawn to the idea of becoming “internet famous.” After all, Justin Bieber was discovered on YouTube, and influencers with more than 1 million followers can make \$100,000 per post for content paid for by brands.⁷ In 2014, Yalda Uhls, a researcher at UCLA’s Children’s Digital Media Center, surveyed tweens (ages eight to twelve) about their values, compared with those of previous generations. She provided them with a list of seven values—community feeling, image, benevolence, fame, self-acceptance, financial success, and achievement. Of these, 40 percent of the tweens ranked fame as their top value.⁸ Uhls found that “the biggest change occurred from 1997 to 2007, when YouTube, Facebook and Twitter exploded in popularity. . . . Their growth parallels the rise in narcissism and the drop in empathy among college students in the United States. . . . We don’t think this is a coincidence.”⁹

Reality TV and social media have removed many traditional barriers to achieving fame. Celebrity hopefuls think fame will

allow them to feel desired and seen; live an elite, high-status lifestyle; and have a positive impact on their fans.¹⁰ Celebrity is seen as meeting ultimate human desires for love, security, and purpose.

Second, celebrity turns icons into idols. Modern celebrities embody enduring worldly myths: We like them because we want to be like them. Celebrities embody what we celebrate. While most of us live ordinary lives, celebrities are always jetting off to a new premiere or tour, surrounded by wealthy and attractive people who boost their personal brand. As our bodies age and decay, celebrity bodies seem to retain physical strength and beauty. As most of us struggle financially, they seem to enjoy all that money can buy. As most of us influence only the people in our immediate circles, celebrities can shape attitudes, beliefs, and spending habits far beyond their circles. Beauty, wealth, influence, and immortality—these are enduring human desires projected onto celebrities and sold back to us as ultimate accounts of the good life.

Mass media acts to draw our attention toward particular people, telling us who's important to follow or know. Much to my chagrin, I know more factoids about my favorite actors, musicians, and comedians than I do about my flesh-and-blood neighbors. Mass media gives us the illusion of intimacy while drawing our attention away from the true intimacy available within a physical community, be it an apartment building, a book club, or a church.

It is right and good to look to virtuous people as *icons*. An icon is a representation of an image. We are all icons. A virtuous and holy person is someone who represents the image of God particularly well. They remind us of humans' original goodness and offer a glimpse of humans' destiny before sin

ruined everything. Icons call forth the brilliance of the original image and make us want to image God more brilliantly. They are a conduit.

An idol, by contrast, images something other than God. Instead of being a conduit that draws our eyes up to the Lord of the universe, an idol replaces God as an object of devotion or embodies values and myths that compete with God as the original source of human joy and meaning: values like sex, money, and worldly power and ambition. True, most of us don't have literal shrines set up to worship our favorite actors, leaders, or influencers. But in the recesses of our hearts, our attention, and our wallets, our fascination with celebrities often takes up more of our imaginations than does our attention to God and our fellow image bearers.

I live in New York City, which means I occasionally see famous people on the street or the subway. Longtime New Yorkers tell me that the excitement wears off. Still, when I spot a celebrity, there's this odd emotional response. I feel excited when I see someone from the screen "in the flesh." (*They're right there! They ride the subway just like us!*) I kind of want to talk to them (I have been told to never do this) or just be near them. Depending on who it is, I want to thank them for their work or tell them how much they mean to me. There's a magnetic quality, as if by being around a famous person, I can absorb some of their glow.

There's a reason it's called "celebrity worship": our obsession with celebrities, or trying to be celebrities ourselves, betrays a spiritual hunger unique to late modernity. The decline of religion in the West means emptier churches. But the hunger for transcendence is as strong as ever. What humans of the past have found in traditional worship, fraternal organizations, and

family and local community, we now seek in part by consuming images of people we don't and can't know.

Some theorists link celebrity worship to the decline of institutional religion over the past century. "A celebrity . . . is a 'personality' who can summon up primary psychological processes like identification, love, and adoration," write Deena Weinstein and Michael Weinstein. "Celebrity is methadone for the soul, produced by consumer capitalism to palliate unfulfilled psychological needs, social resentments, and spiritual discontent."¹¹

It goes without saying that Christians can partake in celebrity worship too. Of course, we know better than to call it worship. Maybe we think of it as "honoring our heroes of the faith" or "following great men and women of God." We perceive that certain Christian leaders are particularly gifted or called to great kingdom purposes. And no doubt certain Christians are. The problem arises when our admiration becomes an ultimate allegiance, when we place superhuman expectations on a fellow image bearer that no actual image bearer was made to bear—certainly not alone and certainly not without deliberate limits on their own power and prestige.

There is a cost to our obsession with celebrity: what it does to fellow image bearers. Like all idols, it exacts a human price: loneliness and isolation; a strain on family life and intimate relationships; the pressure to keep up appearances when one's private life is crumbling, creating a divide in one's very self; the loss of privacy and solitude; and the temptation to escape the pressure with substance abuse and other addictions.

For the purposes of this book, I'd like to offer a definition of "celebrity" as *social power without proximity*. We put celebrities on pedestals, from which they influence, inspire, entertain,

and exhort us. The power differential between us and them is, on one level, obvious. They are recognized in a crowd; most of us blend in. They are treated like very important people; we go about daily life as normies. Their work—whether in books, sermons, song lyrics, or script lines—is etched into the minds and hearts of millions; most of us are happy if just one person really hears and sees us. They get paid (often an exorbitant amount) to share their thoughts and talents, to influence; most of us do not.

Yet the power differential is on another level quite hidden, making it more insidious. Andy Crouch notes, “Celebrity combines the old distance of power with what seems like its exact opposite—extraordinary intimacy, or at least a bewitching simulation of intimacy.” He continues,

It is the power of the one-shot (the face filling the frame), the close mic (the voice dropped to a lover’s whisper), the memoir (the disclosures that had never been discussed with the author’s pastor, parents, or sometimes even lover or spouse, before they were published), the tweet, the selfie, the insta, the snap. All of it gives us the ability to seem to know someone—without in fact knowing much about them at all, since in the end we know only what they, and the systems of power that grow up around them, choose for us to know.¹²

We think we know our favorite ministry heads, worship leaders, authors, activists, and evangelists, because we follow them on social media or hear them preach from a stage or read their words on a page. But we are engaging with a presented, mediated self. And the absence of true knowledge, and true accountability, leaves abundant opportunity for their social power to be

misused and abused. To have immense social power and little proximity is a spiritually dangerous place for any of us to be.

This is true not just for individuals but for entire movements. If recent headlines, evangelical consumerism, and my own upbringing are any indication, the American church has overall mimicked celebrity culture rather than challenged it. We have too many institutions built around personalities—people with immense social power but little or no proximity. We're well past the point of thinking of celebrity as a neutral tool.

Fallen Leaders

On a dreary fall afternoon in 2014, I found myself in one of my favorite cities, on a trip with *Christianity Today* (CT). The magazine where I had worked as an editor for several years was preparing a cover story on women apologists, and I had been sent to Oxford, England, to profile one of them. As a college student, I had studied abroad in Oxford and ended that semester enchanted. I was grateful for another chance to walk its cobblestone streets, passing under the Bridge of Sighs on my way to the King's Arms pub to end a long day of interviews with a pint.

But Oxford's charms couldn't quell the knot growing in my stomach as I prepared for another interview with the profile subject. She worked for an organization bearing the name of a famous apologist, and CT had received a disturbing tip about him in recent weeks. Specifically, we had heard from a source who wasn't ready to speak on record that the apologist had been seen at a hotel overseas with a woman who wasn't a family or staff member. Now I needed to ask the apologist if she could speak to his character and whether she had ever seen or heard anything that might lend credence to the tip.

After a long conversation about her scholarship, the time came for me to ask. A look of horror came over her face as I asked in as neutral a way as possible about this man's character, referencing the tip *CT* had received. She stated strongly that she had never seen or heard anything that would lead her to question the apologist's character or integrity. She suggested that, because he was such a public figure proclaiming the gospel in a hostile, secular climate, it was no surprise he had enemies—that rumors might spread from people who were trying to take him down and tarnish the reputation of the church.

She trusted him and I trusted her, and that day there was nothing more to ask. Honestly, I was relieved. I reported back to several editors at *CT* about what I heard, and the story lay dormant for years.

That is, until the truth about the beloved evangelist came to light, leaving his fans, his supporters, and the organization that bore his name in shock and grief.¹³ We thought we knew him, but he had successfully evaded accountability and lived a double life, in no small part because of his global stature and fame and the trust we had placed in him from afar.

It wasn't the first time that *CT* had received a disturbing tip about a leading light of evangelicalism—a pastor, ministry leader, or entertainer who had been credibly accused of misconduct. As an independent, journalistic publication, we were responsible for digging into these tips and following the truth wherever it led. It sometimes seemed like a credible news source such as *CT* was one of the few institutions that could hold accountable these leaders who had apparently evaded accountability via other means. With every negative news story, *CT* got blowback: we were spreading gossip, destroying someone's reputation, or creating division in the body of Christ. But *CT*

was compelled to report the truth out of *love* for the church, to expose “the fruitless deeds of darkness” (Eph. 5:11) and to seek some initial form of justice for the victims of those deeds.

Sometimes the tips we received went nowhere because sources weren’t ready to speak on record. They were still enmeshed in the public figure’s church or organization and were afraid of losing their jobs and social standing or facing other forms of retaliation. Other times the tips proved to be more complicated than presented, or they devolved into “he said, she said” narratives, with few ways to substantiate conflicting claims. But other times, such as in the case of the famous apologist, the tips we received proved to be horrendously true.

Over time, the more tips *CT* received, the more I wondered if the leading lights of evangelicalism were who they said they were. A casualty of working in journalism is cynicism: you start to hear troubling things, in part because people come to you, hoping that you’ll look into an allegation. Over time, I started to wonder if the most famous Christian leaders—perhaps *because* they were so famous, existing in an echelon beyond most mortals—were truly people of deep Christian character. My journalistic eyes developed cataracts of suspicion.

Many of the fallen Christian leaders we reported on over the years had not started out as celebrities. They had started out in ministry by gaining a following for their accomplishments, creativity, or virtue—the previously explored healthy avenues for fame. They had wanted to serve their community or make a dramatic impact. Almost always, they had started out hoping to make more out of the name of Christ than their own.

But over time, it seemed, the fallen leaders managed to accrue immense social power without true proximity. They cultivated an image of spiritual importance while distancing themselves

from embodied, in-person means of knowing and being known. Because they were so gifted or entrepreneurial or articulate, they had been allowed to evade normal accountability. Perhaps board members, colleagues, and donors had formally insisted on checks and balances, but the leaders were allowed to do and say things that others couldn't; they were just that important to the mission.

Over time, a chasm grew between who they were behind closed doors and who they were on stage or in their own sermons and anecdotes. They had started to believe their own hype. And adoring churchgoers, staff members, book publishers, and social media fans were at the ready to feed the hype, because they derived their *own* meaning and identity from a simulated connection to the celebrity Christian. These celebrities had amazing “platforms,” and we, their fans and followers, had put them there.

The problem of celebrity in the church has now far eclipsed any temporary gains it might have offered along the way. But before diagnosing the multiple costs of celebrity power, we have to go back a bit, into recent history, to see how we got here and where we might have chosen another path.