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## Reckoning with Status and Realigning our Hearts: A Review of Celebrities for Jesus

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## Reckoning with Status and Realigning our Hearts: A Review of Celebrities for Jesus

### Abstract

"Where... dynamic pastors and a church's 'good intentions' begin, celebrity status can quickly overwhelm."

Posting about the book *Celebrities for Jesus* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/reckoning-with-status-and-realigning-our-hearts-a-review-of-celebrities-for-jesus/>

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### Comments

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# Reckoning with Status and Realigning our Hearts: A Review of *Celebrities for Jesus*

Ruth Clark

August 16, 2022

**Title:** *Celebrities for Jesus: How Personas, Platforms, and Profits are Hurting the Church*

**Author:** Katelyn Beaty

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What's the deal with stardom?

Do you remember that feeling you get when you see someone who is 'famous'?

I can recall a 'brush with fame' at the Mall of America when I was in high school. My best friend, an avid basketball fan, saw a famous athlete who was walking near the food court. She freaked out—screaming, jumping, and running closer to 'get a better look', or even to try and talk to the celebrity. I didn't know him, but it was impactful for her.

Athletes. Artists. Authors. Politicians. These occupations have led the pack of 'famous' for decades. Others are being added more recently: reality TV hosts and participants, advocates, social platform influencers, even people who are famous for 'being famous'. Hmmm.

I don't follow celebrities. I can name very few current athletes in very few sports. I don't know any of their stats. I couldn't tell you who became famous on TikTok or what faces cover the most recent grocery-aisle tabloids.

I'm simply not interested.

Thus, I approached this book, *Celebrities for Jesus* by Katelyn Beaty, with some skepticism. This was going to be a book for 'other Christians' who follow all. The. People. What I found instead is a lot to think about.

Beaty writes, “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.”<sup>1</sup> While some Christians certainly have led faithful lives of service to Christ in the public eye, more often, the stories differ.

## Church and Celebrity

Beaty explores how the American church has “mimicked celebrity instead of challenging it”<sup>2</sup>, while still proclaiming to be ‘in the world but not of it’. I found myself asking, “Why?” And, it didn’t take long to think through the concerns that plague our churches. We are concerned about declining attendance, about statistics of young people leaving the congregation, about not fulfilling these fill-in-the-blank ideas (common words include: relevant, engaging, dynamic, seeker-friendly, mission-minded, etc.). All of us are significantly influenced by our environment and culture, so we look at the tools we have (platforms), and the concerns we have (declining people in the pews), and maybe we can meld the two. How can we get people to ‘come back’ to our church buildings? Maybe inviting a ‘big name’ to the building. How can we ‘impress’ our youth programming? This will get ‘our numbers’ back up. This is ‘the fix’.

In the first part of her book, *Big Things for God*, Beaty addresses the present reality of mass media-driven culture and the influence of consumerism within our church communities. Christians love when big-name athletes, actors, or other famous persons publicly state a belief in Jesus. We like it when someone famous (who has a position of power and influence) validates our faith. Yet, that person will never know us; similarly, we don’t grow in our love for Jesus from them because they will never live in proximity to us, and all of what we know of them is curated online. Nevertheless, we like the association with ‘status’. And often, our money follows. Books, music, events, home décor, merch of all varieties. Instead of seeing the literal idolatry of this posture (valuing the individual and opening our wallets to connect to the status, unrelated to Christ and His posture of humble service), we justify the ‘following’ because of the numbers or credibility or membership it provides.

What are the effects of the ‘megachurch’ on American Christians? Beaty writes, “Today there are around about 1,750 megachurches (defined as over 2,000 members) across the United States, some with weekly attendance numbers of more than 30,000”<sup>3</sup>. And, while acknowledging benefits that megachurches can provide for spiritual growth, Beaty states that “(the) megachurch has also altered our understanding of the pastor... a defining feature of megachurches is how much attention revolves around the lead pastor—almost always ‘personally charismatic, exceptionally gifted men’<sup>4</sup>. Compared with large Catholic and mainline churches, megachurches are the ‘product of one highly gifted spiritual leader,’ and the spirit and feel of the church reflect the vision and personality of the individual leader.” (p. 46)

But where these dynamic pastors and a church’s ‘good intentions’ begin, celebrity status can quickly overwhelm. Especially when so much attention within the megachurch structure is

placed on one individual: the lead pastor. As Beaty writes, “But other Christians have reached for the tool of celebrity and found that it ... has more power over the user than the user has over it.” (p. 6-7). Megachurches need megapastors, who are celebrities in their influence; whether the pastors are growing in the fruits of the Spirit has become less important. This is the launching point for part two of *Celebrities for Jesus*, as Beaty explores the temptations for abusing power, chasing platforms, and creating persona that have led to a lot of brokenness within our church communities and damaged the witness of the church in the United States.

And while spiritual leaders certainly have their own responsibility of their brokenness and actions (think of the seemingly continuous stream of pastors and leaders exposed for scandals, abuse, extortion, etc.), we, as laypeople, also can admit having a problem. On a road to recovery, admitting a problem is the first step.

## We Have a (Celebrity) Problem

Our spiritual discipleship is being shaped by ‘Christian culture’: excessive marketing, mass producing, and ‘super-sizing’ church buildings, ministries, books and products to, ultimately, make money for someone. Beaty writes, “Later on, I’d learn that celebrity is a feature, not a bug, of the contemporary evangelical movement.”<sup>5</sup> What are the hallmarks of our current church culture in the United States? If the role of church is to aid in our spiritual discipleship, what type of discipleship is happening when churches rally around the actions of one gifted speaker and place an emphasis on ‘impressing’ attendees through size, ministries, or ‘cool’ factor? Are people being formed by a dynamic personality or by humbly submitting to Christ while at church?

Furthermore, I found myself asking, how have I been influenced by my culture and environment? I can recall my ‘church shopping’—notice the use in phrasing—when moving to a new community. I was the consumer. Church was the ‘department store’. Was the preaching interesting to my intellect? Was there an immediate practical application? Was the music what I liked? Were my ‘preference-boxes’ checked?

## Shaping our Hearts

The final part of Beaty’s book, “The Way Up is Down” provided a much-needed balm and hope for the church and Christianity. Beaty suggests, “The next generation of church leaders is better off abandoning the fixation on cultural credibility, instead pursuing ordinary faithfulness.”<sup>6</sup> Beaty blends personal and biblical narrative to address and encourage our Christian witness. She exhorts devotion to loving God by serving and knowing others in the mundane and unimpressive details of living faithful, unknown, and obscure lives. Along the way, she highlights names such as Henri Nouwen, Eugene Peterson, Dallas Willard and others who “have called us to embrace a Christian life of integrity, humility, and simplicity”<sup>7</sup>.

I found her final section to be both comforting and challenging. In my church congregation, octogenarians modeling faithful obedience to Christ is incredibly impactful in my spiritual journey. What ways can church programs create authentic intergenerational interactions? And where are our blind spots—places we are tempted to exalt celebrity status of an individual (possibly online) over faithful Christian humility of fellow church members? When do you and I chase ‘a quick fix’ instead of faithful discipleship?

As we tune our hearts to gospel witness, we can rest in this: “We don’t build or usher in the kingdom of God. We merely attest to its reality in our lives.”<sup>8</sup> We’ve already received a perfect Savior in Jesus. God’s kingdom isn’t dependent upon us or upon any celebrity name. However, God’s depth of grace is a reason to jump, maybe scream, and certainly to rejoice!

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1. p. 6

2. p.19

3. p. 45

4. Thumma, Scott. “*Exploring the Megachurch Phenomena: Their Characteristics and Cultural Context*,” Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Retrieved 8 August

2022. [http://hirr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma\\_article2.html](http://hirr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/thumma_article2.html)

5. p.6

6. p. 157

7. p.171

8. p. 177