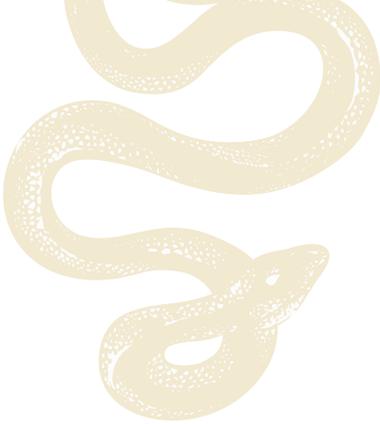


CELEBRITIES FOR JESUS

GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE

KATELYN BEATY



A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Welcome!

Thank you for reading my book about celebrity in the church. I wrote it because, perhaps like you, I started growing weary of all the headlines in recent years about fallen celebrity Christian leaders. I started to wonder why we keep putting people on pedestals, how celebrity leads to various temptations and abuses, and how all of us can recover a vision of ordinary faithfulness.

The following discussion guide provides a summary of each chapter as well as questions to prompt conversation in your discussion group, book club, small group, or among friends. I truly believe we all have a role to play in holding leaders accountable, resisting the pull of self-glory in our own hearts, and pursuing ordinary faithfulness—off the stage and screens, embedded in real relationships in our daily lives.

I hope that as you read and discuss *Celebrities for Jesus*, you will feel educated, sobered, inspired, and even hopeful. And I hope your conversations together lead to new insights and mutual encouragement.

Thank you for reading this timely book.

KATELYN BEATY





CHAPTER 1

Social Power without Proximity

Celebrities for Jesus starts by examining the role that famous Christians played in the author's life as a teenager growing up in the 1990s. Beaty argues that celebrity is a feature, not a bug, of the evangelical movement. She distinguishes between *fame* and *celebrity*. *Fame* is a timeless phenomenon that arises from someone's accomplishments or virtue. *Celebrity*, by contrast, is a modern phenomenon that uses mass media to project an impressing or alluring image that captivates audiences. Specifically, celebrity is "social power without proximity." It is the capacity to influence, inspire, and entertain, but from the distance of the stage or the screen. Many celebrity Christians evade accountability because of this distance and lack of proximity. They start to believe their own hype.

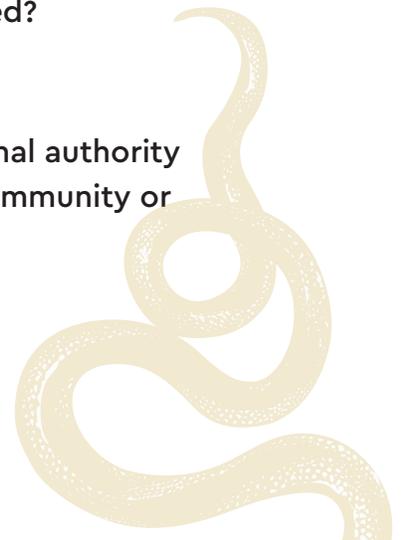
- **Who is a famous person who became famous for good reasons and has stewarded their fame well?**
- ***Celebrity* relies on mass media—television, radio, film, and social media—to project a curated image. Is this bad? Can mass media be used for good?**
- **Why do you think our modern age is obsessed with celebrity entertainers, musicians, professional athletes, and the like? What does our obsession speak to?**
- **Beaty defines *celebrity* as "social power without proximity." What would proximity mean or look like in your life? In the lives of Christian leaders?**

CHAPTER 2

The First Evangelical Celebrities

Chapter 2 looks at three historical figures who fed celebrity in the church, even without meaning to. Dwight L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham—the latter arguably the most famous evangelist ever—preached an individualistic gospel, used mass media to share the gospel, and befriended celebrities to gain cultural acceptance. Beaty argues that these evangelists overshadowed the local church and other institutions. Graham and his colleagues saw the temptations that came with celebrity status. They committed to board oversight, financial accountability, and partnerships with local churches. Yet in the last fifty years, trust in institutions is suffering an all-time low while trust in celebrity individuals has mushroomed. Even institutions find their common life overshadowed by the power of charismatic leaders. We see this in the megachurch movement, the focus of chapter 3.

- **What is your relationship to the word *evangelical*? Be honest!**
- **According to media theorists such as Neil Postman, how do mass media change the message, particularly the message of evangelists?**
- **What does the Modesto Manifesto—the agreement that Graham made with his colleagues—get right? What might it have overlooked?**
- **Do you agree that individual authority has eclipsed institutional authority in our time? If so, what evidence do you see of this in your community or church? On the internet?**





CHAPTER 3

Megachurch, Megapastors

This chapter examines the story of Willow Creek Community Church, the most influential megachurch in US history. A megachurch is a congregation with more than two thousand members; they almost always revolve around their lead pastor. Bill Hybels founded Willow Creek in 1975. Over the decades, his preaching drew thousands of people to the church. As time passed, Hybels was treated like the most important person in the room and was allowed to get away with things that others couldn't. He managed to evade accountability because people saw him as central to the church's mission or a hero in the faith. That lack of proximity (from chap. 1) led to Hybels's alleged sexual misconduct against several women. Willow Creek's story is a sobering lesson in the cost of putting any spiritual leader on a pedestal. When they fall, so do we.

- **What does the megachurch model of Christian community get right? What does it tend to miss?**
- **What is the difference between *privacy* and *secrecy* for Christian leaders?**
- **Why can it be hard for church staff and boards to hold charismatic figures truly accountable?**
- **What is the fallout when celebrity pastors fall from grace—for a church community and for the church's broader witness?**

CHAPTER 4

Abusing Power

This section of the book names three temptations that come with celebrity. The first is abusing power. Power is given by God to humans to steward the world and bless others. Yet, celebrity often exposes a clinging to worldly power that seeks to dominate instead of bless. Beaty looks at several stories of fallen celebrity leaders to show how they abused power. Sometimes the abuse is verbal; the author notes that unrighteous anger is not befitting of ministers of the gospel. Sometimes the abuse leads to financial misuse and lavish lifestyles, despite the Bible's teachings on modesty and transparency. Sometimes the abuse is sexual, as we've seen with stories emerging from the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements. And sometimes institutions serve to protect their celebrity leader and end up spiritually abusing people who are asking for truth and accountability.

- **What is the difference between worldly power and Christlike power? Who is a leader you know who has stewarded their power well?**
- **Why do you think it took so long for Mark Driscoll, former pastor of Mars Hill Church, to be held accountable?**
- **What is the connection between celebrity power and sexual abuse/misconduct? How does one fuel the other?**
- **When churches and organizations learn of allegations against their founder or top leader, what should their response be—and not be?**





CHAPTER 5

Chasing Platforms

In this chapter, Beaty examines the second temptation of celebrity: chasing platforms. She shines a light on Christian book publishing and ways the industry rewards and perpetuates celebrity. Today, more than half of Christian publishers are owned by a multinational corporation that exists to make a profit. The pressure to create revenue crowds out other important, missional considerations. Author hopefuls are told they must have a large platform in order to publish books. Some author hopefuls deceptively fudge the appearance of audience size by buying “fake followers” on social media. Beaty also examines the ethics of ghostwriting and recent plagiarism scandals within Christian publishing. She speaks with several industry insiders in hopes that leaders will challenge the platform obsession from the inside out.

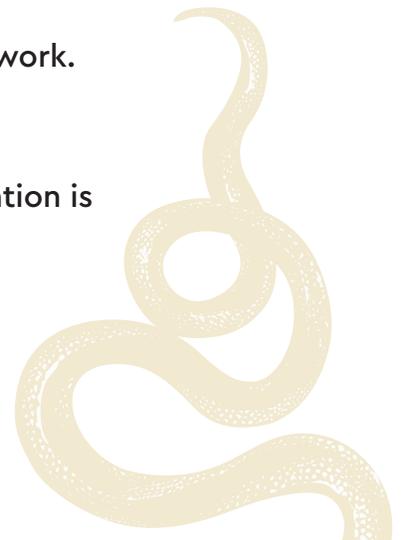
- **Do you think of reading books as part of your spiritual journey? If so, what book (besides the Bible) has shaped you the most?**
- **What insider practices described in this chapter were new to you? Were any of them disturbing? Why?**
- **Do you agree that ghostwriters should be overtly credited? If you knew that one of your favorite books wasn't actually written by the person whose name is on the cover, would you value it differently?**
- **How do you think author hopefuls can pursue book publishing with integrity?**

CHAPTER 6

Creating Persona

This chapter examines the third temptation of celebrity: creating persona. *Persona* is the way we all show up in various settings and roles. Celebrity figures face immense pressure to show up in ways that meet fans' and followers' needs. Thus, there's often a disconnect between the celebrity's interior life and life on stage, and many feel like few people actually know them or value them apart from their celebrity status. In church settings, this can lead to burnout, unhealthy coping mechanisms, or a feeling of being "alone at the top." One way to counteract this dynamic is to hire and train Christian leaders who seek to be deeply known and seen—to have *proximity*. Some leaders may need to leave public ministry for lengths of time in order to rediscover their true self. Followers and fans must also examine their relationship with celebrity leaders and whether they are turning people into idols.

- **Why is celebrity power bad for celebrities themselves? What toll does it take?**
- **How can Christian leaders pursue real accountability before problems crop up that arise from being "alone at the top"? What does true accountability look like?**
- **Describe a time when you've seen "collective narcissism" at work.**
- **Think about a celebrity you admire. Do you think your admiration is healthy or unhealthy? How can you tell?**





CHAPTER 7

Seeking Brand Ambassadors

This chapter explores why evangelicals in particular attach to celebrity figures. Fearing loss of cultural power in recent decades, they align themselves with figures who can make the faith look credible and attractive to the public eye. We see this dynamic in many evangelicals' embrace of celebrities such as Kanye West, Chris Pratt, and Justin Bieber. Celebrity pastors who wear luxury clothing specifically befriend and minister to Hollywood celebrities, using slick marketing and Instagram to project an image of cool. The chapter ends by asking why Christians want to appear cool to the world in the first place and whether that pursuit is distracting them from actually loving their neighbors.

- **How should people of faith respond when someone famous becomes a Christian?**
- **Should Christians today fear loss of cultural power and influence? If so, what should they do about this waning influence?**
- **What are the risks of "claiming" a celebrity figure as representing Christian faith?**

CHAPTER 8

The Obscure Messiah and Ordinary Faithfulness

In the final chapter, Beaty calls readers to reclaim a pursuit of ordinary faithfulness—away from the spotlight, the stage, and the screen. She examines the life of Jesus and shows how he escaped the crowds to be with God and refused to wrest control and power in the way the world does. She critiques much of the American church's growth mindset and calls leaders to return to depth and discipleship over crowds and spectacle. Drawing on an insight from Andy Crouch, she offers that friendship—true proximity—is a powerful antidote to celebrity power. None of us need another fan, but we could all stand to have another friend. She ends the chapter with a quote from George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*, which praises "unhistoric acts" as preserving goodness and dignity in the world.

- Was Jesus famous in his time? If so, what did he do with his fame?
- Who is a person in your life who models ordinary faithfulness? What effect have they had on your life?
- What do you think of the antidote to celebrity being *friendship*? Do you think friendship is enough to offer proximity and accountability?
- What will it take for the American church to "detox" from celebrity power? Besides friendship, what is the antidote?

