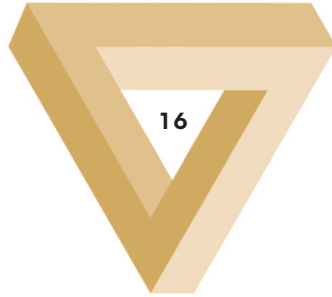


**IMMEASURABLE**

REFLECTIONS ON THE SOUL OF MINISTRY

IN THE AGE OF CHURCH, INC.

**SKYE JETHANI**



## CELEBRITY

**CELEBRITY PASTORS** are not a new phenomenon, nor is our human tendency to exalt our leaders to unsustainable heights. What is new is the number of celebrity pastors and the speed with which they are being created and corrupted. Every generation has had a handful of well-known pastors, but why are there now so many, and how do they achieve so much influence with so little accountability? What explains the creation of an entire celebrity class within American evangelicalism?

There is more than a spiritual or psychological reason behind the rise of today's pastoral pantheon. There is a systemic economic force at work as well, what I call the "Evangelical Industrial Complex" (EIC).

First a little background. In 1961, in his farewell address to the nation, President Eisenhower warned about the unintended effects of the "military industrial complex." During

World War II, the massive industrial capacity of the United States was redirected to supply the weaponry necessary to defeat Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. After the war, many factories returned to assembling Buicks and bicycles, but not all of them. For the first time, the United States had a permanent arms industry that relied on military conflicts for profit. Without war these corporations would collapse. Eisenhower, the celebrated army general who led the Allied forces to victory in Europe during WWII, worried that the industries created to end that war would now push the country to start many more. Many now consider Eisenhower's warning prophetic, given the exponential growth in military spending and wars over the last sixty years.

So, what do Eisenhower and the military have to do with the rise and fall of celebrity pastors? Well, just as America's militarism for the last seventy years is partially the result of systemic economic forces, so is the rise of the present clergy celebrity class. There is an Evangelical Industrial Complex that helps create and relies on celebrity leaders. Have you ever wondered why you don't see pastors from small or medium sized churches on the main stage at big conferences, or why most of the bestselling Christian authors are mega-church leaders?

Here's the answer we like to believe: The most godly, intelligent, and gifted leaders naturally attract large followings, so they will naturally have large churches, and their ideas are so great and their writing so sharp that publishers pick their book proposals, and the books strike a chord with so many people that they organically become bestsellers, and these

leaders become the obvious voices to speak at the biggest conferences. As a result, they ascend to celebrity status.

Is this possible? Yes. Does it happen? Sometimes. Is it the norm? No.

Beyond the dubious ethics exhibited by some pastors in pursuit of fame, this market-driven cycle of megachurches, conferences, and publishers results in an echo chamber where the same voices, espousing the same values, create an atmosphere where ministry success becomes defined as mere audience aggregation. For example, some years ago I attended a ministry conference in a large arena. The glittering stage—as likely to host a gyrating boy band as a modern American pastor—was occupied by a solitary figure who had recently ascended the Olympian cliffs to join the pantheon of celebrity pastors. The young man began his address by noting how three years earlier he had attended the same conference with a seat in the “nosebleed section,” but now he was speaking on the main stage (with a book to plug, of course). What had transported him from the periphery to the platform? He was not shy about admitting that his status had been elevated by the exponential growth of his church.

As he reveled in the glory of applause, I wondered how the pastors seated around me in the nosebleed section of the arena felt. Why had God chosen his church for rapid growth and not theirs? Why had he been plucked from obscurity and not them? And how were their definitions of ministry success being formed, or malformed, by this setting that celebrated the magnitude of a leader’s audience rather than his maturity or wisdom, neither of

which our young keynote speaker exhibited?

The real danger of the Evangelical Industrial Complex is not the elevation of immature and unaccountable leaders, but how these leaders in turn warp the vision of ministry held by the rest of us. They cause us to judge ourselves, our callings, and our ministries by a wholly unholy standard. Maybe that is why a growing number of us feel worse about our calling to ministry after attending ministry conferences, rather than better.

Where are the ministry conferences that celebrate those called to the house-church movement? Where are the brilliant, godly, wise, fifty-five-year-old pastors with gifts of communication, carrying timely messages and leading churches of two hundred? I meet such shepherds frequently, but never in the green room behind the main stage of a ministry conference. Such leaders would offer a very different vision of ministry success, one that would bring strength and healing to a burdened audience of pastors, but their voices do not serve the market demands of the EIC and therefore remain unaffirmed.

The Evangelical Industrial Complex is not maliciously seeking to suppress these alternative voices. Instead, their decisions regarding which voices to magnify are made by the cold, calculating demands of the market. Leaders within the EIC, however, often fail to recognize how their dispassionate business decisions and need for sustainable revenues also shape the evangelical movement and the spiritual lives of millions of people. For example, I spoke with a large ministry conference organizer about how speakers

are chosen for the event. He confided that little if any attention is paid to a leader's teaching or doctrine. Instead, the conference requires "marquee" names that can sell tickets. As a result, I've attended a fair number of conferences where the teaching from the main stage has been atrociously unorthodox, but always passionate and entertaining.

In other church traditions there are ecclesiastical authorities who serve as gatekeepers. They guard pulpits and platforms to ensure only leaders who have been tested and approved are granted access to positions of wide influence. They take seriously the apostle Paul's instruction to appoint only mature leaders, not recent converts, with good character and a gentle spirit (1 Tim. 3:1–7). Within American evangelicalism, however, with its low ecclesiology and nondenominational bias, there are no bishops. There are no overseers to guard the flock from the influence and abuse of ungodly leaders filling our media, bookshelves, and conferences. In the place of a church hierarchy, we've built the Evangelical Industrial Complex; we expect publishers, conference directors, and radio producers to protect the flock from wolves. We trust them to filter out the immature, ungodly leaders, and for many years the managers of the EIC were willing to serve this function.

Those days are over.

**In the place of a church hierarchy, we've built the Evangelical Industrial Complex; we expect publishers, conference directors, and radio producers to protect the flock from wolves.**

Chaos in the publishing world brought on by the immediacy of digital communication has put incredible pressure on the EIC to sell books and fill conferences profitably. Facing this existential threat to their businesses, managers within the Evangelical Industrial Complex are remembering that they were not appointed to shepherd us, but to sell to us. Those who had functioned as evangelicalism's bishops for decades have taken off their vestments to reveal the business suits underneath. That's not to say there aren't people working in Christian media who practice discernment and care about the character of the leaders they platform. There are. But industry-wide too often it's market demands, rather than biblical standards, that end up driving decisions.

The rise and fall of any celebrity pastor is merely a symptom of an underlying malady within American evangelicalism. Why are there now so many celebrity pastors? Because they generate a lot of revenue for the Evangelical Industrial Complex. Why do these pastors fall with such regularity? Because the Evangelical Industrial Complex uses a business standard rather than a biblical standard when deciding which leaders to promote.

## REFLECTION AND APPLICATION

Consider withdrawing your support of operations within the EIC that platform or publish leaders who clearly do not exhibit godly character, biblical wisdom, or orthodox teaching. This is not a call to judgment, but to discernment.

Affirm and reward those publishers, radio programs, or conferences that do show wise discernment. Contact editors and program directors and ask them, “How do you decide who to publish or which leaders to feature at your event? What kind of accountability do you expect leaders to have in their ministries before you will platform them? Do you ask for character references before agreeing to give a leader a national audience?” If you are going to trust these businesses with the authority to choose what teaching and leaders influence your faith and leadership, maybe you should investigate how they make these decisions.

Return some of the authority you’ve granted to the Evangelical Industrial Complex to your local ministry authority. No matter how seriously the EIC takes its responsibility to protect the flock, we will never know the leaders we permit to shape our lives via books, podcasts, websites, and conferences. We need incarnate men and women to function in our communities as spiritual fathers and mothers. In the



context of a relationship rooted in trust and love, we should allow them to speak into our lives with an authority that is earned and with a gravity that comes from the presence of Christ in their souls. This is what leadership in the church is supposed to be, and what the Evangelical Industrial Complex can never replace.

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