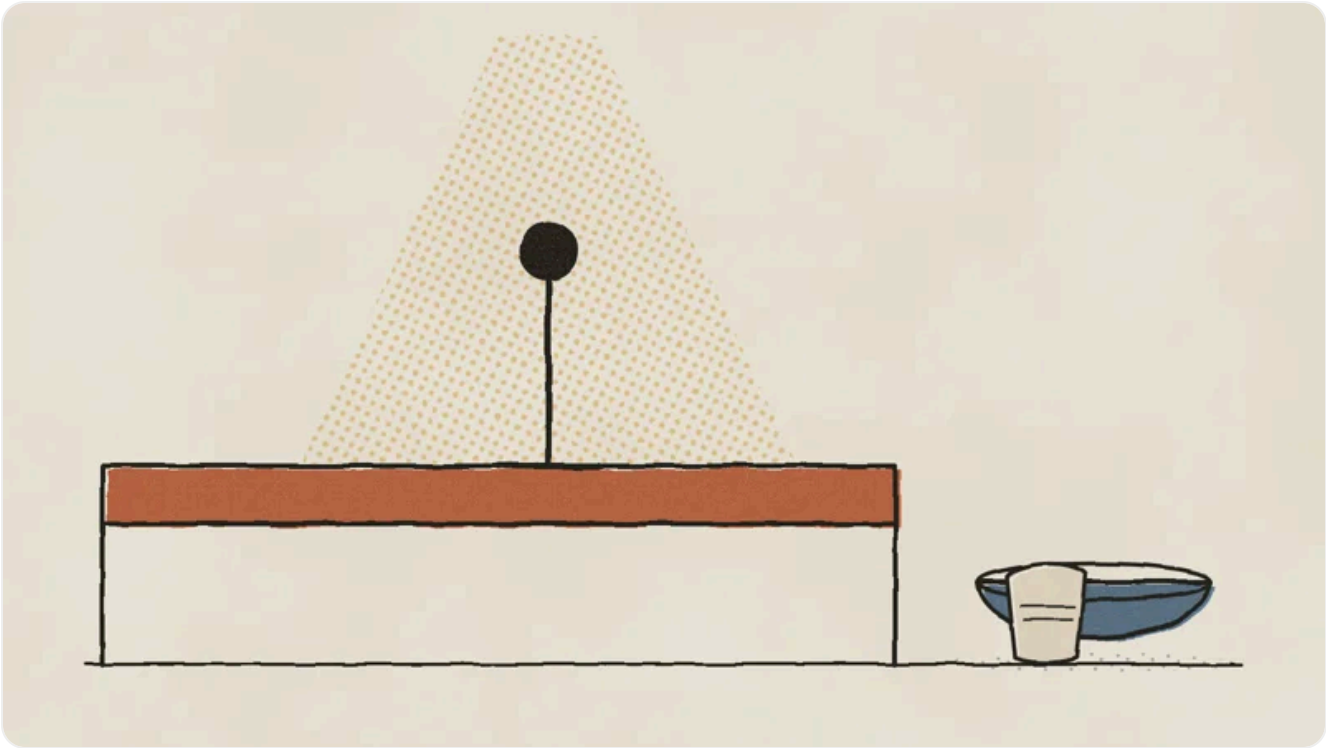
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We Have a Problem with Christian Celebrity Culture



By Tommy Lee



Here is something that has been bothering me about Christendom for a while now. We talk a lot about being servants. We preach about it and sing about it, and we even put it in our mission statements. But I wonder why it's so hard for a lot of leaders to live out. I wonder if deep inside a lot of us want and need that bigger platform. We want more followers and a bigger stage, and we'd like the perks and the money.

Why do Christians who say they want to be servants get so obsessed with being seen? Why is that temptation so alluring? I believe this problem has existed for a long time and social media has just made it more public in recent years.

How we love the platform

In a 2009 interview with Christianity Today, Tim Keller named one of the idols that tempts Christians: “ministry success, similar to the idol of achievement.” It’s hard to spot an idol when the thing you’re chasing is a bigger ministry or you are doing Gospel work. It sounds so good because more people are being reached and saved. But underneath it there is an ulterior motive: I need this to grow so I can feel good about myself.

And we use a humble brag to cover it up. “Praise God for the people who are saved and discipled.” Yet there is a darkness in it where we believe that we are indeed good and the results happen because we caused them to happen. Many leaders are also drawn to the book deals, the likes on social media, high paying speaking engagements, salary increases and more power.

Andy Crouch has helped me think a lot about this in what he has taught and written on power. In a 2013 interview about his book *Playing God*, he said “all of us, not just the ’powerful,’ have real power and the responsibility to use it well.” A small business owner has power. So does a manager, or someone with 2,000 followers. Even my daughter in the seventh grade has power. How do we steward it well and use the power the Gospel gives us to serve all people? In 2018 he wrote for The Gospel Coalition, “Among the many dark gifts of power is distance,” and named it: “distance from accountability, distance from consequences, distance from the pain we cause others.”

Kingdom business or just business

This shows up in faith and work too. We talk a lot about entrepreneurship and call it Kingdom business or business as mission. It’s the sexy thing to do these days and people are obsessed with it. But is that what we really want? Or do we really want more money, and entrepreneurship is a spiritual sounding way to get more money and power?

Alan Barnhart is a good example of what it means to be successful and have money. He and his brother Eric run Barnhart Crane and Rigging in Memphis, and beginning in 2007 they gave the company to the National Christian Foundation. About half of the company’s earnings go straight to ministries and charities around the world. They made that choice. A lot of people are not willing to make that choice because they secretly LOVE their money.

When submit becomes a way to control

Church authority is biblical. Hebrews 13:17 tells us to obey our leaders and submit to them, because they keep watch over our souls.

But what happens when leaders use it to control people who disagree with them and don't do what they say? Do they use it to protect themselves? Does "submit to your pastors and elders" sound different now? What happens when leaders believe they are the lead shepherds AND the sheep are "led astray," "dumb," or "don't know any better"?

A church member asks where the money in the budget is going and gets told they have a critical spirit. A staff member pushes back on a decision because the vision has now changed for the third year in a row, and a few weeks later people are calling them divisive.

Peter told the elders: "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2 to 3).

Giving power away

For leaders, I think this means learning to give power away purposely and deliberately. Allow people to shine and really ask yourself if you desire the power and the platform to feed into something else. You have to ask yourself the hard questions.

- What am I using my power for?
- What am I feeding internally?
- Am I stewarding what God has given me well?
- Do I really believe God's approval of me is already settled?

It's so easy to fool people. It is. After a few years of being a Christian you know what to say and it's not hard being spiritual. But what is inside of you will eventually come out.

How am I making it always about others first and dying to myself because Jesus was our ultimate example? But Jesus is more than our example. He gave up His platform for us, so we don't need one to know we're loved. How do I give a voice to others and allow them to shine? I believe we always need to be thinking about this. I am troubled that too often we are feeding into our own egos.

I’ve grown concerned with Christendom and its obsession with power and money. I think that is why many people are leaving the church but still maintaining their faith. They get tired of the hypocrisy of the people we call leaders. Bluntly speaking, we all make mistakes. We are sinful. Grace saved us. Quit making it all about you and overspiritualizing it.

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