

Book Reviews

Book Notes: Volume 7



by MICHAEL GEMBOLA

The goal of this column is to highlight a few books relevant to the tasks of pastoral care and counseling by providing summaries, reviews, and some commentary. I aim to be primarily informative and descriptive, though at times I will raise questions or counterarguments. I will engage more with some books than others, and I will often highlight one or two representative chapters rather than summarizing a whole book. A book's inclusion or exclusion is neither an endorsement nor a criticism. The books included below are grouped into reviews and are in alphabetical order by the author's last name and are followed by a new section called "Book Briefs," which provides a short introduction to several books that were either sent in by publishers or that I've recently read and want to highlight.

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Celebrities for Jesus: How Personas, Platforms, and Profits Are Hurting the Church, by Katelyn Beaty (Brazos Press, 2022), 208 pages.

Although some are called to more public ministries, the celebrity's combination of "immense social power and little proximity is a spiritually dangerous place for any of us to be" (p.19). By *power without proximity*, Beaty means "the chance to influence without knowing or being known by those you are influencing" (p.100). Many are not tempted to seek celebrity, but every counselor deals with the problems related to it. We care for people hurt by celebrity-seekers, we care for leaders tempted to seek celebrity, and we have celebrities in our own field whom we need to hold accountable.

First, we care for people who have been hurt by celebrities. Often this means caring for people who had bad experiences working for a church or ministry that orbited around a powerful leader. Beaty explains the temptation to be pulled in by powerful people: "When a celebrity pastor invites us to join in their mission of changing the world for Jesus, we get excited that we've been selected for greatness. They fulfill what we've wanted to become: really important people for Jesus" (p.61). This dynamic is risky. Some leaders begin to compromise when they face less scrutiny, as they become more successful and outwardly impressive. But they also hold an outsized symbolic importance in the lives of those who are in their orbit. Beaty explains, "If a person's faith in Christ is centered on one powerful individual, when they fall, so will we" (p.62). Even if faith is not lost, believers are often disillusioned when their leaders fall. It's easy to ask the question, "How could someone who so positively ministered to you also be capable of hurting many others?" (p.62).

Second, Christian counselors often provide counseling for church leaders who are tempted by the power they possess or aspire to have. Beaty wisely cautions church leaders about burnout, emphasizing the importance of seeking accountability, accessibility, humility, integrity, and even obscurity (p.168). Part of the counselor's task is to gently insist that church leaders attend to private matters of integrity and avoid seeking gifts that may appear more impressive while keeping first things first.

That said, my own experience is that few of the pastors I've counseled are actively courting wider influence. I've come across many pastors doing good work who sometimes feel their relative weaknesses in drawing a crowd, yet who also, on some level, appreciate that they couldn't pastor one thousand people the way they pastor one hundred. Some pastors are incredible public speakers and administrators, while others are good at hospital visits and individual or small-group discipleship, but anecdotally, they rarely have all these gifts. As is sometimes said, no pastor has all the gifts of the prophet, priest, and king in equal measure. The task for counselors, as they minister to quietly faithful ministers, is to provide the best encouragement we can muster to help them stay the course in such precious, hidden work.

Third, in the field of counseling, we have celebrities whom we must hold accountable, guarding against the moral dangers that the celebrity dynamic invites. Celebrity counselors exhibit some of the same ethical problems as celebrity preachers or ministry leaders. To give one example, *The Quick Reference Guide to Biblical Counseling* by Tim Clinton and Ron Hawkins (Baker, 2009) was pulled from circulation by its publisher due to plagiarism (p.108). Incidentally, that problem isn't limited to counselors, of course. Beatty gives significant attention to the concerning trends in Christian publishing, specifically the effect of the author platform requirement on church life. "Institutions that an author belongs to become 'platforms' from which to sell books rather than sacred communities where the rules of the market should be off limits" (p.97).

As counselors, it is important to keep in mind that our success metrics differ from those of the world. Personal integrity, wisdom, effectiveness in counseling, and excellence in our organizational work all matter far more than traveling for speaking events and publishing books. A theme throughout the book of 1 Corinthians is the importance of not seeking superiority through spiritual gifts, but rather submitting them all to the call of love (1 Cor 13–14).

It's a challenging theme even for those who are not celebrities by any traditional definition but who fit the description of having influence without proximity, such as through online courses or writing. How does

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