

Celebrity challenge

By [David Heim](#)

February 28, 2012

Occasionally the *Century* editors sit down to talk with experts in magazine marketing. They sometimes tell us that we need to do more with celebrities--feature a celebrity on the cover of the magazine, for example.

No, they're not pressing us to feature Brad Pitt or Lindsay Lohan. What they have in mind is featuring the celebrities of *our* world, that is, the celebrities of the mainline Protestant world.

We usually respond: "But mainline Protestants don't really have celebrities." When the experts look doubtful, the editors look at one another. "Well, we might come up with a few living *semi-celebrities*--but that would take care of only two months worth of covers."

The absence of a celebrity culture seems like one of the healthy things about the mainline Protestant world, even if it limits marketing opportunities. We tend to get uneasy when a person's charisma or accomplishment is the focus of attention. Adulation seems not only naïve and credulous but also ignorant of the mysterious and paradoxical ways God chooses to work.

Skye Jenathi is uneasy, too. He [worries](#) about the prominence of celebrity pastors in evangelical culture, because he thinks the phenomenon promotes idolatry and shallowness.

Jenathi goes on to outline how an "evangelical industrial complex" has evolved to produce celebrity pastors. These celebrities are created not so much to serve the church as to serve marketers' needs to sell books and videos. Here's how it works:

Through any number of methods--powerful gifting, shrewd marketing, dumb luck--a pastor leads a

congregation to megachurch status. Publishers eager for a guaranteed sales win offer the megachurch pastor a book deal knowing that if only a third of the pastor's own congregation buys a copy, it's still a profitable deal. . .

Wanting to maximize the return on its investment, the publisher will then promote the pastor at the publisher-sponsored ministry conference or other events.

As a result of the pastor's megachurch customer base and the publisher's conference platform, the book becomes a bestseller.