

“‘And see how lofty are the highest stars!’: The Most Famous Member of Churches of Christ,  
1919-2019”

## Introduction

Thanks for being here today! This presentation is an attempt to put a slightly more serious spin on material from my “Church of Christ Celebrities” blog, which I started late in the summer of 2017 and ran through the end of 2018. Published every two weeks, more or less, the blog took a *Mythbusters*-style approach to debunking (or not) various celebrities who were supposedly also members of Churches of Christ. While there had been at least one previous attempt to verify and list some of the more prominent members of the various SCM fellowships—Michael W. Casey and Douglas A. Foster undertook just such a project in the introduction to their 2002 *The Stone-Campbell Movement: An International Religious Tradition*<sup>1</sup>—that work is now nearly two decades old, and a number of figures have risen to fame, or perhaps infamy, in the years since.

In no small part, I started the “Church of Christ Celebrities” blog because I had grown tired of hearing people speculate wildly that certain celebrities either were or weren’t members of Churches of Christ (or, in the more common parlance, that they either were “one of ours” or not). Another hope for the project was to introduce friends, family members, and fellow churchgoers to our movement’s history more broadly defined, using someone they might have actually heard of as an *entrepôt*. I had also been influenced by the scholarship of historian Randall J. Stephens, whose work on Holiness, Pentecostalism, and the relationship between rock

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<sup>1</sup> Michael W. Casey and Douglas A. Foster, “Introduction: The Renaissance of Stone-Campbell Studies: An Assessment and New Directions,” in *The Stone-Campbell Movement: An International Religious Tradition*, eds. Michael W. Casey and Douglas A. Foster (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 42-45.

‘n’ roll and Christianity piqued my interest in this topic when I first read *The Fire Spreads* back in 2015.

From August 2017 to December 2018, I wrote about 35 entries for the blog, usually focusing on a single figure for each post but occasionally offering themed entries which featured more than one subject—such as a baseball-themed blog which I published at the start of the last postseason. In each of the entries, I put my historical chops to the test, combing through both primary and secondary sources to try to determine whether or not there was any meaningful connection between the subject of the post and Churches of Christ. Sometimes, the featured celebrities turned out to be devout members; at other times, they might have grown up in or previously attended a Church of Christ; at still others, the supposed link was nothing more than a rumor.

Today, however, I’m interested in offering a tentative answer to a slightly more complex question: who, at any given moment in the last century of the fellowship’s history, was the most famous member of Churches of Christ? I was inspired to ask this question after reading—of all things—an article on sports and pop culture website *The Ringer* about which NBA team was the “hipster favorite” from 1983 to the present day.<sup>2</sup>

To answer this question, I have not relied on any quantitative historical methods or attempted to tally newspaper or television or internet references over time. Rather, I have looked back through my blog entries, along with the Casey and Foster essay referenced earlier, and noted which celebrities might reasonably have been the most famous members during their

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<sup>2</sup> Jason Concepcion, “The NBA Hipster Team Championship Belt: From Run TMC to the Baby Wolves: the cult faves, cast-offs, and youth movements that captivated in-the-know fans,” *The Ringer*, September 27, 2016, <https://www.theringer.com/2016/9/27/16044638/the-nba-hipster-team-championship-belt-2b2362550006>.

respective heydays. From there, I traced out the broad arcs of their careers, winnowing the list down to the ten figures I believe have held the title at some point in the last century, and identifying the moments at which it was passed from one person to another.

A few caveats are in order. First, because of constraints on time (and audience attention), I have not tried to account for eras when the pendulum might have swung back and forth between two figures repeatedly. Instead, with one or two exceptions, I have simply sought to chart the points in time at which the “belt,” so to speak, was passed to a new individual. Second, I have limited my analysis to those whose fame derives from pursuits other than their faith. (Effectively, this means that Max Lucado is excluded, as his prominence stems mostly from his ministry and written works on religion.) And third, I have opted to make another categorical exclusion in the interest of decorum. Though Jeffrey Dahmer did indeed become a member of Churches of Christ while in prison, the reasons for his notoriety are of a different sort than those of the figures we’ll be discussing, and it seemed highly inappropriate to treat his story in such a flippant manner.

At any rate, this is hardly the most academically rigorous presentation you are likely to hear this weekend, but I hope that it will provoke some discussion all the same (even/especially if you disagree with the celebrities I’ve highlighted), and I do believe that there is a more significant historical narrative about Churches of Christ to be derived from the changing nature of its most prominent figures over time. Let’s begin.

**[1] David Lloyd George**

First on the list is David Lloyd George, best known for serving as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1916 to 1922—a period which includes both British involvement in World War One and the start date for today’s presentation. Lloyd George’s father, William, was a minister in Churches of Christ, and while Lloyd George did not retain his faith past early adulthood, growing up in the fellowship nevertheless left a lasting imprint on his worldview. (In fact, Jerry Gaw of Lipscomb University is working on a religious biography of Lloyd George, so if you’re interested in more on the PM, he’s the person to contact.)

## **[2] Byron Nelson**

Although David Lloyd George’s star diminished somewhat throughout the 1920s and 1930s, he remained the most famous (former) member of Churches of Christ until the meteoric rise of American professional golfer Byron Nelson. Though Nelson retired from competitive play in 1946 at the relatively young age of 34, his short career still ranks among the best all-time, and he is best known for setting the streak for consecutive tournament victories at 11. (For comparison, Tiger Woods’s best streak, the second-longest of all time, was a mere seven consecutive wins stretching from 2006-2007.)

Nelson possibly overtook Lloyd George as the most famous member of Churches of Christ upon winning The Masters in 1937, but he undoubtedly did so in 1945, the year of Lloyd George’s death and the year that Nelson set his still-unbroken streak of consecutive PGA tournament victories.

## **[3] Pat Boone**

Byron Nelson's reign would prove significantly shorter than David Lloyd George's, and he would be overtaken during the 1950s by crooner, occasional political commentator, and frequent product spokesperson Pat Boone. Boone was one of the biggest stars in pop music during the late 1950s and early 1960s—by some measures, second only to Elvis himself in that era. Later in his career, Boone's tastes gravitated toward country and gospel music, and he was inducted into the Gospel Music Hall of Fame in 2003. Boone also still holds the record for spending 220 consecutive weeks on the Billboard charts.

Because Nelson had not been golfing professionally for a decade at that point, Boone probably passed him in 1955 with the release of his first number-one single, a cover of Fats Domino's "Ain't That a Shame." He followed up that performance with another number-one single in 1956 and three more in 1957, sealing his ascendancy for a considerable period. (For the sake of time, we will not get into the issue of whether or not Boone left Churches of Christ for a charismatic church in the 1960s. The conventional wisdom says that he did, though Boone has more recently disputed that he ever actually left the fellowship.)

#### **[4] Billy Joel vs. Meat Loaf**

At any rate, Boone likely held the belt until the late 1970s, when an otherwise unconnected pair of recording artists with backgrounds in Churches of Christ released records that would rise to the top of the charts and define the courses of their respective careers. In 1977, singer, songwriter, and pianist Billy Joel released *The Stranger*, an album which contained a number of his most famous songs, including "Only the Good Die Young." (Joel, though avowedly nonreligious today, was baptized into Churches of Christ when he was eleven.) That

same year, however, singer Meat Loaf (originally Marvin Lee Aday) released his own record-setting album, *Bat Out of Hell*, which contained the hits “Two Out of Three Ain’t Bad” and “Paradise by the Dashboard Light.” (Meat Loaf’s grandfather was a minister in Churches of Christ, and the singer himself was a student at Lubbock Christian for a short time.)

One could make a case for either artist supplanting Pat Boone; Meat Loaf’s 1977 album sold over four times as many copies as Joel’s, but Joel followed his up with a much longer string of successful albums over the next fifteen years.

#### **[5] “Weird Al” Yankovic**

Either way, Billy Joel and/or Meat Loaf held the title for several years, but likely ceded it (even if only for a time) to up-and-coming parodist “Weird Al” Yankovic in 1984. Yankovic’s first major hit, “Eat It,” a send-up of Michael Jackson’s “Beat It,” netted the artist his first Grammy Award that year and was his highest charting song until 2006’s “White & Nerdy.” Yankovic is a lifelong member of Churches of Christ, and was the celebrity I most frequently heard associated with the fellowship growing up—a particular point of pride for me, as I owned quite a few of his albums.

Though he has always retained a devoted following, Yankovic’s career has brought him in and out of the spotlight several times in the last four decades, meaning that by our criteria for today’s presentation, he did not actually hold the belt for long.

#### **[6] Amy Grant**

Yankovic's successor as the most famous member of Churches of Christ is the first (and indeed, only) woman to feature in today's presentation: the singer and songwriter Amy Grant. Grant, a granddaughter of A.M. Burton who grew up attending Ashwood Church of Christ in Nashville, released a string of chart-topping CCM hits throughout the 1980s, including "El Shaddai." Having duetted with Chicago frontman Peter Cetera in 1986, she later pivoted her career into more straightforward pop music with the release of her 1991 album *Heart in Motion*. That album, which included the hit "Baby Baby," would go on to be Grant's most popular, with over five million copies sold in total.

Grant likely would have held on the title for longer, if not for an unusual turn of events in the political realm which shortened her reign considerably.

## **[7] Ken Starr**

In 1994, former U.S. circuit judge and solicitor general Ken Starr was appointed as independent counsel for the Whitewater investigation, an inquiry which led to the eventual impeachment (though not removal) of President Bill Clinton. Since then, Starr has spent time as dean of Pepperdine University School of Law and as president and chancellor of Baylor University. However, Starr resigned from Baylor in 2016 after an investigation into the school's failure to properly respond to sexual assaults committed by football players. (Most recently, Starr has once again been the subject of popular discussion because of the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court.)

Starr's appointment as independent counsel and his subsequent authorship of the Starr Report kept him in the news cycle for a considerable amount of time during the mid-to-late

1990s, and he would not cede his position as the most famous member of Churches of Christ until a fellow governmental servant made the transition from Capitol Hill to the Manhattan District Attorney's Office.

### **[8] Fred Thompson**

Fred Thompson, the eighth holder of the belt, is best known either as an actor or as a politician, depending on whom you ask. By profession an attorney, Thompson served as a U.S. senator from Tennessee for roughly a decade (1994-2003), finishing out Al Gore's term and being elected to one full term before retiring from the office. He also appeared as a prosecutor on the famous network show *Law & Order* for several seasons, beginning in 2002, stepping away from that role to prepare for the 2008 Republican presidential primary season. (Thompson grew up in Churches of Christ in north Alabama and south Tennessee, though his lack of attendance later in life proved to be a minor point of controversy during his brief presidential run.)

Though Thompson's presidential campaign did not take off, he would retain his standing as the most famous (former) member of Churches of Christ until a certain Louisiana family became the most unlikely of breakout television stars in the early-to-mid-2010s.

### **[9] The Robertson Family**

*Duck Dynasty*, of course, was an enormously popular reality show which focused on the Robertson family of West Monroe, Louisiana and its thriving duck call business. The series ran on A&E for eleven seasons (in the six years spanning from 2012-2017) and set a number of



viewership records during its run. Outspoken patriarch Phil's political views also continued to keep the show in the public eye, even as its ratings declined somewhat during its final seasons. (Correct me during the Q&A if I'm wrong, but the last few times I've been in a Lifeway store, the Robertsons' various and sundry books were the only, or at least the most prominently displayed, works written by members of Churches of Christ. I am curious to hear if others have had similar experiences.)

The *Duck Dynasty* show is still a fairly sizable cultural touchstone, and members of the family still periodically make appearances on other TV programs, but *Duck Dynasty's* aforementioned ratings decline did open the door for another contender to rise to the top of the heap.

## **[10] Lester Holt**

The tenth and current holder of the belt, Lester Holt, is, as you probably know, currently the anchor of the *NBC Nightly News*. Holt rose to that position after Brian Williams's unseemly exit from the job in 2015 and has been there ever since. In addition to his regular duties, Holt, a member of the Manhattan congregation, also served as the moderator of the first presidential debate between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, as well as a Democratic primary debate earlier in 2016—performances for which he was highly commended.

Only time will, tell, of course, who will supersede Holt as the most famous member of Churches of Christ going forward. I had once thought that Savannah Chrisley, of the bizarrely popular reality show *Chrisley Knows Best*, might overtake Holt, but while she was briefly a

student at Lipscomb (the campus of which appears in one episode), she soon transferred to nearby Belmont, and does not appear to have any other connection to Churches of Christ.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As we conclude, I want to make a couple of observations about the wider world of “Church of Christ Celebrities.” Although not reflected in today’s presentation, Churches of Christ have produced an enormous number of professional musicians, particularly in the genre of country music, as well as collegiate and professional athletes in baseball and football. The tradition has been home to several prominent politicians, too; longtime US Senator John Cornyn of Texas is likely the most powerful political figure to come from Churches of Christ, as the three Stone-Campbell-affiliated presidents (James Garfield, Lyndon Johnson, and Ronald Reagan) all hailed from the Disciples. Numerous other members, including civil rights lawyer Fred Gray, artist Robert Rauschenberg, and animator Jim Jinkins (creator of *Doug*) failed to crack today’s list, but their works are well-known all the same.

Too, there is some measure of irony in the fact that a tradition which once conjured up mental images of crusty, hardscrabble farmer-preachers aloof from the concerns of the world has gone on to give that same world leading figures in music, art, sports, politics, and many other fields unrelated to ministry, biblical studies, or theology. (With apologies to the audience, those areas, for better or worse, do not often produce genuine celebrities.) Furthermore, when I originally began this project, I had operated under the (mistaken) assumption that the story it would reveal would be one of declension—one in which the most visible representative of Churches of Christ would descend from the stateliness of the British Prime Ministry to the

rough-and-tumble of the Louisiana woods. As I soon found out, though, and as I hope to have shown today, the narrative is much more complex, even though I think the general trend line has been towards greater cultural engagement on the part of members of Churches of Christ.

Perhaps the story of “Church of Christ Celebrities,” whatever further scholarship reveals it to be, can be more thoroughly weaved into the history of our fellowship going forward—especially into the story of our move toward more complete institutionalization. Perhaps we were never quite as culturally isolated as we sometimes think or imply that we were. While it is dangerous to generalize too much from the stories of individual celebrities—who, by their very nature, are exceptional—there are almost certainly more significant conclusions to be drawn than I have done today.

At any rate, I imagine that some of you might have your own ideas about who else may have challenged for the belt, or questions about other figures who have been linked with Churches of Christ (whether correctly or incorrectly), so I’ll draw my portion of the presentation to a close now. Thanks again for your attendance today!