

Chapter One Introduction

The entertainment and media world is more powerful and impactful than ever before. It is literally guiding culture. To have impact, the Bible says, we must be as gentle as doves and wise as serpents (Matthew 10:16). We have done a good job being like doves; now it is time to really get smart. In order to have a positive impact, believers need to master their craft and do it with excellence so they can bring to the table good works that reflect their faith. We were blessed that all our past work on shows like *The Voice*, *The Apprentice*, and *Touched by an Angel* gave us the leverage to produce our passion projects: The Bible series, *The Bible* movie, and *A.D.* Now we are blessed to have produced with MGM Studios and Paramount Pictures a reimagining of the epic tale *Ben-Hur*.

We agree with Megan: we need to be a part of the culture in order to change the culture. We have spoken about this with Megan over the years when she interviewed us about The Bible series and *A.D.* We know God calls us to be salt and light in this world. It is not always easy, but it can be done. Megan's book offers a practical, honest look at one person's experience in the entertainment industry, and her story offers great encouragement for those who want to take that journey, too.

— Roma Downey and Mark Burnett,
founders of Lightworkers Media



One

A Seat at the Table

Why People of Faith Need to
Work in Careers of Influence

*Be who you were created to be,
and you will set the world on Fire.*

—ST. CATHERINE OF SIENA

NOT EVERYONE IN THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY was supportive of my pursuing a career in media. I remember a family friend saying, “Why on earth would you want to work in that industry? That is Satan’s playground!” But I never looked at it that way. I believed God had blessed me with talents to do well as a broadcaster, and I also really enjoyed creating, producing, and working with people. A career in the media seemed like a good career option.

But I did not start my career in TV proclaiming, “I’m a Christian!” or wearing a WWJD bracelet or refusing to do certain stories because of the ungodly subject matter. No. Before I was known for being a woman of faith, I wanted to be known for doing good work. I wanted to become a great reporter, a great interviewer, and a great host. I didn’t really talk about my faith that much in the beginning. I never compromised who I was, but I didn’t wear my faith on my sleeve at every turn. But along the way I started learning what it meant to make myself available for God to work through me. I’ve come to believe that

we don't have to be a missionary or a pastor to live out the gospel. Wherever God has placed us, we have a platform. You and I can live in a way that honors God—and attracts attention to Him—right where we are. But it took me some time to figure this out.

Who Would I Be on TV?

When I got the job as a morning traffic reporter in San Antonio, Texas, I was prepared to simply do my job, which was report on the morning commute, exchange a few pleasantries with the weatherman and morning anchors, and go about my day. Viewers would hopefully see my warm personality shine through, but there was no room for me to share any personal details beyond some bullet points here and there. But if the anchors asked me what I did over the weekend, I could and might mention that I went to church or attended a Christian concert. A morning newscast moves pretty quickly, and our particular station kept things rather tight, so I only had opportunities to make very brief comments.

Then, not too long into my career as the traffic anchor, I was asked to cohost the local talk show *Great Day SA*. It was an hour of high-energy chitchat about all kinds of topics. We opened the show with an eight-minute segment of ad-libs about our day, what we had done the night before, what segments were coming up on the show, our opinions on things. This was the opposite of the morning news. Suddenly I had to decide exactly who I wanted to be onscreen. Interestingly, the Bible has something to say about deciding who we are: “Make a careful exploration of who you are and the work you have been given, and then sink yourself into that” (Galatians 6:4 MSG).

So who was I? I knew my faith, I knew to live according to God's Word, and I knew to do everything “as working for the Lord” (Colossians 3:23 NIV). But what exactly does that mean in practical, specific,

real-life, career-in-the-media terms? I can tell you; it is much easier to just read a teleprompter and follow the script.

When I first started *Great Day SA*, I did not feel comfortable talking about myself and giving my opinions on TV. I was afraid of being singled out and pigeonholed as the “Christian girl,” and I worried that could derail my chances for advancement in my overly secular career field. But soon circumstances forced me, in a good way, to decide if I was going to be true to myself and to my faith in my professional life. I also saw those around me trying to figure this out. At one point, one of my coworkers, who had a steady boyfriend, said on air that she was single. After the show, I asked her about it. She confirmed that she had a serious boyfriend, but explained that on air, she wanted to appear very single and available. I was surprised to hear her say this.

I was also dating someone seriously—and he is now my husband. At the time I assumed everyone would be honest about their single/dating/married status. (Munch on that one the next time you see a talk-show host proclaim they are single!) I needed to quickly decide what my answer would be. Would I appear single, too? I had to decide. My boss did actually encourage us to “refrain from talking about our significant others” on air: he liked us to “appear available.” Again, I needed to decide what I was going to say—and I hadn’t expected to be making decisions like this.

It didn’t take me long to decide I wanted to be truthful. God makes it very clear: “The LORD detests lying lips, but he delights in those who tell the truth” (Proverbs 12:22 NLT). After reading this verse, my situation seemed pretty certain. If I had a boyfriend, I needed to be honest. This was being true to myself. My decision was made, and I never looked back. I decided to just be me. Aristotle tells us “Knowing thyself is the beginning of all wisdom.” I was beginning to learn what this meant.

Happy Birthday?

During a one-hour *Great Day SA*, we had several five-minute segments. Our producers—primarily our executive producer—selected most of the topics and stories. Occasionally the hosts, or “talent,” pitched a story that would make it on the air. But generally we were assigned all the stories we did; we were not really given a choice to say no. It was part of the job to simply accept the assignment, perform our duties for the show, and do so with energy and enthusiasm.

One day our executive producer decided to acknowledge it was Hugh Hefner’s birthday. Hugh Hefner’s claim to fame is that he is the founder of *Playboy*, a magazine that until recently featured images of nude women. Our executive producer wanted my cohost and me to say happy birthday to Hugh Hefner and talk a bit about him—as we did with all the celebrities whose birthdays we acknowledged. We usually said a few things about what these individuals were known for and what we appreciated about them. Well, my cohost had a picture of herself at the Playboy Mansion in California. She wanted to display it on the screen during the segment so she could talk about how neat it was to see the famed mansion. I immediately felt uncomfortable. But I was a new television talk-show host, so I didn’t say anything in our planning meeting. As the “new girl” in the mix, I did not want to ruffle any feathers. I’ll be honest; it was tricky—I wanted to please my boss and keep those paychecks coming! Also, having just started working with this group, I wanted to get along with everybody. This is my personality. The idea of being at odds with them was more than a little distressing.

The next day, when we went live, we began the segment by saying happy birthday to Hugh Hefner. My cohost, Kristina, proceeded to talk about the time she went to the Playboy Mansion and how cool it was. When it was my turn, I just could not hold back. “Well, I don’t

think Hugh is that cool. Some of us don't admire that magazine or what he stands for. I do wish women would value their bodies more highly and refuse to take off their clothes for his magazine. Then maybe he would go out of business!"

Kristina stared at me. She expected these birthday wishes to be a lighthearted segment. She thought I would praise pop culture, as the rest of the world usually does. But I just couldn't. This was the first time on this show that I let my authentic self speak, and I expressed a strong and countercultural opinion. I immediately realized, though, that I wasn't alone in that opinion. You see, we always had a small live audience in the studio. When I said what I did about Hugh Hefner, the whole room burst into applause. More people agreed with me than I had expected!

But all I did was share my opinion. My cohost thought Hugh Hefner was cool and admirable; I did not. Each of us was entitled to our opinion, and hers is definitely more the norm in today's culture. To take the opposite stance felt like a far bigger step than I wish it had. When general opinion leans toward praising Hugh Hefner, it's scary to take and speak the opposite view.

This was my first experience with understanding what it meant to have a "seat at the table" as a person of faith. And I will say that, even though we had different opinions, my cohost was and still is a good friend of mine. She simply had a different opinion. Nothing wrong with that at all.

But herein lies an important point: people complain about the mainstream media, saying they disagree with many of the opinions of talk-show hosts and entertainers on TV—that network television does not fairly represent the Christian faith. But I also understand how hard it is to try to represent faith in God in the TV industry. Suddenly I found myself in a position of influence. I was being asked questions that required authentic answers that reflected my faith, my life, my

moral code. I was interacting with people who were making radically different choices in life than I was.

What's interesting is that the combination of my more conservative views and Kristina's more worldly ones ended up making for great and animated conversation on TV. We had a third cohost, Glenn, who was hysterically funny. If things got too intense, he would crack a joke at just the right time. Both of them were and are super-talented TV hosts with great timing and energy. Our ratings were very good for the entire three years we were all together on that show. And viewers frequently commented that they liked the differences in our personalities and opinions. But it did take me a while to realize this and settle into my role.

Equal Time for the Truth

When I started cohosting in 2002, an already established and popular segment was a visit with a local psychic. A frequent guest on the show, he would take calls from viewers who shared their problems or asked questions about loved ones who had passed. The psychic claimed to be able to reveal prophetic answers and even deliver a message from the deceased. This kind of segment is what the industry calls "good TV" in that it resonates with viewers and often results in high ratings, which means lots of people watch.

Callers often cried with gratitude, exclaiming how thankful they were to be able to hear from those beyond the grave. The psychic loved this venue for performing, and his dramatic responses made the segment extremely popular. But I noticed that occasionally people would ask deep questions like "Why do good things happen to bad people?" When the psychic didn't really know how to respond, I thought to myself, *I wish we could do this same segment with a pastor or counselor!* I knew that at the upcoming monthly brainstorming meeting, we would

do the usual and discuss story ideas as well as possible guests to interview. I decided that, at the next meeting, I would suggest inviting a pastor onto the show.

I was very familiar with author and pastor Max Lucado. He leads a church in the San Antonio area and is quite well-known in Christian circles. During our brainstorming session, I suggested we invite Max Lucado on and allow viewers to call in and ask him questions about matters of faith, life, family, and more. My suggestion was met with blank stares from my colleagues, who were no doubt thinking: *Who is Max Lucado? What will he talk about? Will viewers really be interested in him?* They were quite skeptical, and the idea was turned down . . . initially.

My boss said to me, “We don’t do that. We don’t get religious on this show.” But I went back to my boss and said, “You know how popular the psychic segment is? I really think people are longing to talk about deeper issues, about spiritual issues. I’m telling you, Max Lucado is very respected and well-known in religious circles and beyond. I do think our viewers will respond to him.”

My boss was still not very interested, but one day a last-minute cancellation created an opening on our show. My executive producer asked me if I would contact Max Lucado’s people to see if he would come on. Max agreed, he and I had a great interview, and then he invited viewers to call in. They asked all kinds of questions, ranging from, “Why does a loving God allow 9/11 to happen?” to “What do you do if it seems God is not answering your prayers?” Max handled the questions thoughtfully and honestly. He admitted he did not know all the answers and explained that at such moments faith plays its part. Max and the viewers had some great conversations on a variety of life topics.

The next day I learned our ratings had skyrocketed and dozens of viewers had emailed saying how much they enjoyed having Max

Lucado on the show. And that same boss who had said “We don’t do religious segments” looked at those amazing ratings and, because he also felt the segment had gone well, said, “Okay, we *do* do those segments!” My boss asked me to arrange for Max Lucado to come on the show again.

It’s Not a Conspiracy

I share this story to make this point: I don’t believe anyone on that talk show was purposefully scheming to keep Max Lucado or some other religious topic or figure off the show. I think they genuinely did not know who he was, so they did not think he would be of interest to our viewers. How could my colleagues think otherwise? They were not believers and they did not go to church, so talking about religion was not a part of their lives. That’s when I began to realize how important it is to have that seat at the table. Simply because I was in the room that day, I was able to suggest a story idea that involved faith and resonated with viewers. You see, I don’t believe the media is trying to keep all matters of faith off the air. I do believe that oftentimes, when decisions are being made, not all viewpoints are represented.

I also saw more clearly than ever that my very public job provides an opportunity for a platform. It’s also the concept behind the phrase “a seat at the table.” I believe I can be most effective in shining for Christ in my career because I have a seat at the table. I am able to be in the room when a decision is made. I am on the scene when a story is being covered. And I am one more voice in the room asking questions. A lot of people talk, write, and even preach about “converting Hollywood” or “bringing morals back to television.”

And you know what? Most of the people who have written on this topic have never spent a day working in either industry. They suggest boycotts and campaigns, but I don’t think that approach always works.

I think sometimes God uses us most effectively when we are involved in the day-to-day operations—when we get coffee with a colleague, work late at night on a story, or write a script with a coworker. Take a seat at the table where your voice can be heard. Organizational change is most effective coming from the inside, rather than the outside looking in.

Why?

I am very aware that I am not a doctor who has performed life-saving surgeries. Nor am I a foster mom who has cared for dozens of kids or a teacher who has mentored and inspired countless students. But I am involved in an industry that, for good and bad, has a profound impact on our culture and on our young people.

Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City and a bestselling author, addressed this matter when he answered the question “Why should Christians be in the mix of society and business?” Here is part of Pastor Keller’s response:

*Why? As the city goes, so goes the culture. Cultural trends tend to be generated in the city and flow outward to the rest of society. People who live in large urban cultural centers, occupying jobs in the arts, business, academia, publishing, the helping professions, and the media, tend to have a disproportionate impact on how things are done in our culture. Having lived and ministered in New York City for seventeen years, I am continually astonished at how the people living here and in large cities affect what everyone else in the United States sees on the screen, in print, in art, and in business.**

* *The Reason for God*, New York: Dutton, 2008.

I so agree! Christians need to be involved—have a seat at the table—in all these different professions. We need to be on the inside. We need to be in the room when decisions are made and impact culture from within.

In the Arena

My purpose in sharing these stories and others throughout the book is to encourage people who want to pursue and thrive in a career. You will have a seat at a table. In fact, you may already have a seat. It doesn't matter how big or small your job or career, we all have areas of influence. For those of you already established in your career, your seat at the table might be in the boardroom, or the break room. Others of you extend influence for the Lord in the classroom as you educate students or colleagues; as a nurse interacting with patients and doctors; or in the courtroom as an attorney advocating for a client.

And for those of you in the process of deciding what career to pursue, follow your dreams and listen for God's direction. He has a plan and a purpose for your life, and wherever you find a seat at the table, it is a big part of His plan. Jeremiah 29:11 reminds us of this truth: "For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future (NIV)."

So when you take that seat, remember the concept of doing excellent work first. Establish a reputation of excellence and earn the respect of your coworkers and managers. It's not always about winning or achieving. Those are worthy goals, and we should strive for excellence in all that we do. But the point is this: *you are there*. You are in the room. You have earned your place of influence, so carefully consider how you can live out your faith while you are able.

President Theodore Roosevelt spoke about this when he gave a

series of lectures in France in 1910. He called his talk “The Christian’s role in modern society.” He understood and captured this concept well, and his words remain relevant today:

It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who’s actually in the arena—whose face is marred by dust and blood and sweat, who strives valiantly, who errs, who comes up short again and again. Who, at best, knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who, at worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly.

Takeaway

1. Realize your job, right where you are, can be a platform.
2. Be confident and creative when representing your Faith. I saw an opportunity to contribute with a segment idea, and it ended up being a win-win for all.
3. My opinion is there is no conspiracy against faith in the media. We just need more people of faith to take their seat at the table and do excellent work.
4. Dare greatly and don’t get discouraged—just get in the arena and start trying.