

The Case for Christian Investigative Journalism



By Julie Roys

Everyone loves Christian journalists when they're publishing glowing reports about a ministry that rescues street children and gives them hope for a future. I know. I wrote a [story](#) like that a couple years ago, after spending a week with my daughter in the Dominican Republic. That story warmed my heart. It also received unanimously positive feedback in emails and on social media. We Christians like stories showing believers doing precisely what they should be doing and behaving like the salt of the earth.

We also like Christian journalists when they expose the evils of the world. I [write](#) and [speak](#) frequently about the abortion industry, for example, and always receive enthusiastic support from Christians when I do. Similarly, when I take on [feminism](#) or the [LGBTQ agenda](#), Christians—at least conservative ones—generally cheer.

But if I write about evils within our camp—sin committed by Christians, churches, or Christian organizations—the backlash can be sharp. I can get accused of being self-righteous. Someone recently commented sarcastically that I should run for president if I'm "so perfect." The comment

came after I [reported](#) that the president of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability had been fined for misrepresenting himself as a licensed CPA for 15 years. I felt the story was important, especially given that the ECFA is a watchdog group that's supposed to hold other Christian organizations accountable.

Or, sometimes people accuse me of creating division and destroying the witness of the church. This happened recently when I exposed [gross financial wrongdoing](#), [bullying](#), and [deception](#) by James MacDonald, founding pastor of the Chicago-area megachurch, Harvest Bible Chapel. In addition to getting slapped with a lawsuit (which MacDonald and the church have now dropped and reimbursed me for) Harvest accused me of attempting to "stir up gossip, sow discord," and "discredit the church."

Some of this is understandable. None of us likes to see sin in our own camp, especially among people and groups we admire and love. Plus, Christians already get beat up enough in the secular press. Do we really need to pummel our own?

Yet in Scripture, we see a strong precedent for calling out sin in our own camp—not as a last

course of action, but first. First Peter 4:17 says, “For the time is come that judgment must begin at the house of God . . .” Similarly, Matthew 7:1-5 challenges Christ-followers to take the “plank” out of their own eye before removing the speck from someone’s else’s eye. As believers, we cannot confront the world for its sin without first dealing with our own.

Journalists Bring Reform

Fortunately, there is a small contingent of Christian journalists and bloggers who expose sin within the Christian community.

Bob Smietana, who’s now editor-in-chief of Religion News Service, reported on the sexual misconduct scandal involving Willow Creek founder, Bill Hybels, for [Christianity Today](#). Blogger Warren Throckmorton has written extensively about [alleged fraud](#) committed by Gospel for Asia. (Gospel for Asia recently agreed to refund donors [\\$37 million](#) to settle their class-action suit.)

And, over the years, WORLD Magazine has published numerous exposés. These include ones on the [indiscretions](#) of filmmaker and scholar Dinesh D’Souza; the [misuse](#) of Mars Hill Church funds to promote books by Pastor Mark Driscoll; and [gambling](#) by Jerry Jenkins, who at the time of the report was chairman of the Moody Bible Institute Board of Trustees.

WORLD’s “muckraking” has even caught the attention of the New York Times, which surprisingly printed an [article](#) praising the evangelical newsmagazine several years ago. The Times noted that WORLD’s exposés have led to substantial change. D’Souza, who attended an overnight conference with a “woman not his

wife,” resigned as president of The King’s College after WORLD’s report. Similarly, Pastor Mark Driscoll resigned from Mars Hill several months after WORLD reported his book-selling scheme. And author, Jerry Jenkins, resigned as chairman of the Moody Bible Institute Board of Trustees not long after WORLD reported that Jenkins had been caught gambling. (Jenkins stepped down from the board altogether last year, after I [blogged](#) about his questionable use of an apartment on Moody’s campus.)

“(E)vangelical Protestant journalism is generally more public relations than reporting,” the Times wrote. But the mainstream newspaper noted that there are some exceptions. And while some may lament that reality as a bad thing, I strongly contend that it is good.

In addition to the changes I already mentioned, I have seen investigative reporting spur other positive changes. My reporting about MacDonald led Harvest Bible Chapel to fire him and replace much of its elder board and senior staff. A report I did on the promotion of leftist notions of [social justice](#) within the education department at Wheaton College led Wheaton to fundamentally change the education department’s conceptual framework. And my blog posts about [mission drift](#) and self-dealing at the Moody Bible Institute led the top three officers there to [resign](#). It also prompted the school [to adopt](#) the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy.

“Not in Public”

The objection to reporting embarrassing or shameful information about Christians often doesn’t stem from the content of the reporting, though. Often, what people find offensive is simply the public nature of reporting.

Many point to Matthew 18:15-17 which says:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.

They conclude from Matthew 18 that it's wrong to report sin publicly if a journalist hasn't first exhausted the process of going to the accused one-on-one, then two- or three-on one, and then in front of the church.

Certainly, if a journalist is doing his job, he always consults the accused and gives the person or people a chance to respond. Also, many times before I report wrongdoing, I will try to resolve the issue privately. For example, before I reported anything about wrongdoing at the Moody Bible Institute in 2017-18, I first notified trustees and asked them to correct the issue. It was only after I witnessed their reluctance to do so, and their own complicity, that I reported anything publicly.

However, Matthew 18 does not apply to correcting every sin for every Christian. It applies only to personal matters—a sin between two individual Christians. It says, "If your brother sins against you . . ." Rarely, if ever, is a Christian journalist reporting about a sin against himself.

Instead, we report sin committed by public figures and prominent churches and groups against other believers, or even the people who support them. And we are reporting the stories because there is a public interest. These leaders or organizations are influencing large groups of people. And often, these leaders and organizations are publicly

funded and rely on public trust.

With public matters, Scripture offers a different model. This model is depicted in Galatians 2 when Paul confronts Peter for refusing to eat with gentiles. As a leader, Peter's example had the potential to lead many astray. So, Paul doesn't confront Peter privately; he does it publicly. And interestingly, Paul writes about the incident and publishes it to the church in Galatia, so there's actually biblical precedent for doing precisely what reporters do.

Similarly, Jesus confronted the money-changers openly in the temple. And again, this incident is recorded and published in all four gospels. So, the idea that sin must always be confronted privately is simply not biblical.

In addition, 1 Timothy 5:20 specifically addresses what to do when an elder or pastor in the church is sinning. It explicitly says, "But those elders who are sinning you are to reprove before everyone, so that the others may take warning." That's a pretty clear command to confront publicly.

The Evangelical Celebrity Machine

But often the reluctance among Christians to support investigative journalism has nothing to do with Scripture. It's more about protecting ourselves, our image, and our interests, often to the detriment of the reputation of God and His church.

Unfortunately, evangelicalism has become a business. And our celebrities and high-profile institutions are our signature brands. Publishers, churches, music labels, etc . . . have to protect their money-making brands. So, those in leadership intimidate the whistleblowers. They

bury the sin. And they vilify the truth-tellers.

This is life inside what's been dubbed the "evangelical celebrity machine."

Janet Mefferd, a national talk show host, met the full force of this machine several years ago when she confronted Mark Driscoll for plagiarizing the work of Dr. Peter Jones in his book, *A Call to Resurgence*. Much to Mefferd's surprise, this revelation of wrongdoing didn't unleash a torrent of criticism aimed at Driscoll; instead, it unleashed outrage at Mefferd.

The backlash was so intense that Mefferd soon backed down and apologized for confronting Driscoll. However, Mefferd's assistant producer, Ingrid Schlueter, resigned in protest. "All I can say," Schlueter wrote, "is that there is an evangelical celebrity machine that is more powerful than anyone realizes."

At first, Mefferd stayed silent about what actually happened. But a few months later, she disclosed the details in a blog post. Mefferd writes that after she confronted Driscoll, Driscoll's publisher defended Driscoll and publicly attacked her; one of Driscoll's influential friends tried to blacklist Mefferd, telling others to avoid her show; Mefferd "got hate mail by the boatload"; and reportedly, she "couldn't keep up with the number of inaccurate and untrue stories about her online."

Unfortunately, Mefferd's experience isn't unique. WORLD has experienced this sort of backlash numerous times. And in the past eighteen months, I've experienced this phenomenon too. After publishing damaging reports about Moody and James MacDonald, I felt the full force of the evangelical celebrity machine. I had speaking engagements canceled. I was kicked out of a recording studio. I was fired. And I got sued.

But as a former journalism professor once told me, "If you're not receiving any hate mail, then you're probably not saying anything." Pushback comes with the territory. And for better or worse, that's what journalists—Christian or secular—learn to accept.

It could be different, though. Recently I met with the president of a large Christian organization and had a very frank and open conversation with him. He admonished me for some things he thought I was doing wrong. He thought I operated without accountability, but I informed him that I have a board for my ministry, which holds me accountable. In addition, I've placed myself under the leadership of my local church.

But then I asked if I could admonish him and pointed to several instances where well-known associates or friends of his ministry had participated in wrongdoing, which had been published to the larger Christian community. Instead of the "machine" operating to protect the wrongdoer and punish the messenger, I urged him to leverage this machine to hold the wrongdoer accountable. If more Christian leaders would use their influence to confront sin among their peers, the church would look and act more like Jesus.

This is my hope for the Christian community. As believers, we should have a higher commitment to the truth than the world, not a lower one. Ephesians 5:11 says, "Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them." The verse doesn't have an exemption for believers. If professing Christians are participating in evil, their hypocrisy makes their sin even greater, and it's even more important to expose.

We need to remember Proverbs 27:6: "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy." Investigative journalism is a gift that can edify the body. Granted, it needs to

be done well: journalists should never report rumor, but always seek to verify information with a credible source; journalists should report both sides, always giving the accused a chance to answer their accusers; and, journalists should use anonymous sources sparingly – and never as the basis of a damaging report.

But by all means, Christian journalists should investigate vigorously and report. And, the

Christian public should welcome these reports, not shoot the reporters. I'm convinced that as we tend less to our image and more to holiness, God will be pleased, the church will be purified, and ironically, our public image will improve. But it won't be because we're burying our sin; instead, it will be because we're dealing with our sin, repenting of it, and truly becoming salt and light to an increasingly dark world. ■