

PTL: The Rise and Fall of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's Evangelical Empire

John Wigger

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PTL is a fascinating study of the ignominious collapse of an evangelical empire.

John Wigger's *PTL* covers the famed Christian media empire of Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker. Theirs is a story of tremendous inventiveness, and of an even more stunning collapse. Thorough and thoughtful, Wigger's book affords nuance to a story that has often otherwise been relegated to tabloid fodder.

The Bakkers' tale was not always the cautionary one that it's seen as today. At the height of their careers, they helped to revolutionize television. Drawing inspiration from the revivals of early Pentecostalism and taking advantage of the advent of the home TV, they sought to bring Christian ministry into every household, one charming puppet show or exploratory talk show at a time.

Wigger captures the best and worst of PTL (shorthand for Praise the Lord). "At its best," he says, it "became a crossroads of American life, an intersection where evangelicals and non-evangelicals could meet." Guests from Little Richard to Larry Flynt, and from Oral Roberts to future presidents, populated PTL stages and made the Bakkers a phenomenon.

But Jim Bakker's dependence on prosperity gospel, and his insatiable need to reach for the next greatest thing, led to ballooning costs and extravagant projects that not even the most devout of donors could keep up with. Wigger documents the bevy of frightening financial decisions that led to PTL's eventual demise—and to convictions for outright fraud. Scandals, including the accused rape of eventual *Playboy* bunny Jessica Hahn, are treated just as carefully.

Tammy Faye herself exists in this work as a sympathetic figure, hiding behind her makeup as things devolved in her marriage and her company. The book treats her addictions and breaks with total sympathy and respect, and affords space to her more progressive tendencies.

Even Jim Bakker—whose eyes were definitely bigger than his stomach—has his malfeasance put into appropriate context. Though the catalog of his offenses is extensive and exhaustively listed here, he emerges as a somewhat tragic figure.

PTL is a fascinating study of the ignominious collapse of an evangelical empire—an event that captured and scandalized a nation.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July/August 2017)

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