

Speaking up

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 18, 1998](#) issue

William F. Buckley Jr. recently described what riding the lecture circuit meant for him (*New Yorker*, October 12). "Your agent discloses . . . where exactly the lectures will take place. . . . I do not actually examine, until the plane has set down, . . . my exact destination and the name of the body sponsoring my lectures." Buckley imagines that his experiences in the lecture circuit are fairly typical. He acknowledges that, among other rewards, there is the "economic factor": "There is no journalistic or pedagogical activity more remunerative. . . . The compensation . . . consists not only of the fee and the satisfaction of passing along the Word but of the relative ease of preparation." Buckley says he has a standard lecture that he updates regularly, so he has "in hand a speech that, as far as the audience is concerned, might have sprung full-blown from my imagination that morning."

"So *that's* what it's like!" people say to me and people like me. No it isn't, at least for most mere mortals, such as us professors and pastors (call us P & P). When we address conferences and campuses we don't have agents, ordinarily don't get to or don't want to repeat speeches, do get close to our hosts and audiences, and don't pocket honoraria of the amounts Buckley assumes.

Another thing the celebrity world does not have in common with the ordinary circuit-riders world is this: we agentless P & P speakers make many nonpaying commitments. All but four or five of my 20 to 30 speaking commitments these four months, for example, involve no honoraria. A P & P is on various boards, does consulting, refereeing, judging and chairing, and often ends up shelling out instead of taking in. Try to get past a celebrity's agent to involve the Famous Person in those activities, and you will soon learn what frustration means.

Some noncelebrities do work with agents and speakers' bureaus; there is nothing immoral about that. It's as legitimate as taking salary on tenure or as part of a call. But few P & P people want to live with the obligations of having an agent. If a speakers' bureau were to advertise me, for example, I'd better be able to draw a crowd, be a sensation, satisfy the customers, and make everyone say that just

getting a glimpse of me and hearing my words in person was worth what the student council or trade association paid me. On the other hand, if I come only upon invitation, it's different. Then if I bomb, they'll only complain about an unimaginative planning committee for having made a wrong choice. The sun comes up the next day, and the world moves on.

In sum: celebrities and P & P speakers have different experiences on the circuit. P & P people almost always have to tailor their speeches to the occasion. It's not easy, but it keeps one busy doing research. And unlike what Buckley reports, I've met wonderful college students who've picked me up at the airport, entertained me and conversed delightfully. Some of these students and I have stayed in touch for decades.

Other than these differences, I do share one element of distaste with Buckley: it's horrible to have to speak after a long, long salad course when the wine has been flowing, making listeners groggy. I'm glad he speaks, and that he spoke up.