

There Are Some Types of Christians God Can't Use

About 17 years ago, I prayed the most dangerous prayer in the Bible while lying on the floor of my church near Orlando. I repeated these words from Isaiah 6:8: "Here am I. Send me." Then I cringed. I knew God would "mess me up good" in order to use me to touch others for Christ.

I wanted God to use me, but I was painfully aware that we don't just go out and start a ministry on our own terms. God bends and breaks those who speak for Him. He requires full surrender. I had to let go of fears, adjust attitudes and change priorities.

It has become popular today to suggest that God can use anybody. It's true that He does not show favoritism based on race, age, gender, marital history, past failures or income status. Yet His standards have never been lowered; He only uses humble, obedient, consecrated followers.

Many Christians will never be useful in the kingdom because of mindsets or behaviors that limit the flow of the Holy Spirit or, as the apostle Paul said in Galatians 2:21a (KJV), "frustrate the grace of God." I don't ever want to frustrate His grace! If you want God to use you, make sure you don't fall into any of these categories:

1. **Driver's seat Christians.** Jesus is not just our Savior; He is our Lord. He wants to guide our decisions, direct our steps and overrule our selfish choices. There are many believers who enjoy the benefits of salvation, yet they never yield control to God. If you want Him to use you, then you must slide over into the passenger seat and let Jesus drive. If you have a problem with willfulness, learn to pray: "Not my will, but Yours, be

done” (Luke 22:42b, MEV).

2. **Armchair critics.** There are some people who roll up their sleeves and serve the Lord; there are others who make it their business to analyze and pick apart everyone who is doing God’s work. The devil is the accuser, so if you are accusing others, you are operating in the spirit of Lucifer. The Holy Spirit does not work through people who are bitter, angry or judgmental.
3. **Glass-half-empty pessimists.** Many Christians today worry about what sinners are doing, and some spend hours trying to predict when the Antichrist will arise or when the world will end. Meanwhile there are other Christians who focus on winning lost people to Jesus and showing His compassion to a broken world. Who do you think will bear more spiritual fruit—the doomsday pessimist or the hopeful evangelist?
4. **Carnally minded Christians.** It has become fashionable today for believers to lower the standard of moral behavior to the point that anything goes. Don’t be fooled. Just because more and more people are jumping on the bandwagon of sexual permissiveness doesn’t mean God has rewritten His eternal Word.

People who live in blatant sin cannot be instruments of the Holy Spirit. 2 Timothy 2:21 says clearly: “One who cleanses himself from these things will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, fit for the Master’s use, and prepared for every good work.” Our usefulness to God is based on whether we have submitted to the process of sanctification. Holiness is not an option.

5. **Church dropouts.** I won’t win a popularity contest by saying this, but it’s true: God does not use people who have turned away from the church. Today it is fashionable to bash the church; some people have even established “ministries” to lure Christians away from

church and into an isolated spiritual wilderness. Most of these church-bashers are bitter because they had a bad experience with a pastor.

I have only compassion for victims of spiritual abuse. But no one has the right to tear down the work of God just because a spiritual leader hurt him. The church is God's plan A, and He does not have an alternative. If we are going to be used by God, we must get connected to the church and learn to flow with God-ordained leadership.

6. **Timid cowards.** When Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus to pioneer the church there, he exhorted him to break free from fear. He wrote: "Do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord" (2 Tim. 1:8a). Fear has the power to paralyze. All those who surrender to the call of God must bravely open their mouths, defend the faith, risk their reputation and suffer rejection—and possible persecution. If you are afraid to share the gospel, repent of your fear and ask God for holy boldness.
7. **Lazy spectators.** Many Christians today think following God means clocking in for a 60-minute service before driving to the lake. We read quick devotions on our smart phones and breathe short prayers during our morning commutes. But somewhere in all this 21st-century stress, we lost the meaning of discipleship.

If you want God to use you, you must take His call seriously and become a focused student of His Word and a passionate prayer warrior. The apostles of the first century declared: "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). Halfhearted people never changed the world. You must be devoted, committed and passionate if you want to make maximum spiritual impact.

Should We Restore Todd Bentley Again?

In 2008, Canadian-born evangelist Todd Bentley became a household name in charismatic circles when he aired nightly revival services from Lakeland, Florida, for several months. Bentley was known for shouting, “Bam!” as he smacked people on the head—or kicked them—during prayer for healing. He claimed that an angel had been sent by God to bring a great revival to America that would start in his meetings.

But as quickly as Bentley could say, “Bam!” the so-called Lakeland Revival imploded. The meetings, broadcast by GOD-TV, were shut down after news that Bentley had been carrying on an extramarital affair with a woman who had served as his family’s nanny. He later divorced his wife, Shonnah; married the second woman, Jessa; and moved to North Carolina to be quickly restored to ministry by author Rick Joyner.

Immediately after the first fiasco, Joyner provided spiritual oversight for Bentley and eventually became convinced the fallen preacher was ready to go back on the road. Bill Johnson, pastor of Bethel Church in Redding, California, released a 2011 statement saying that he felt Bentley was ready to be back in the pulpit.

Fast-forward to 2019, and another Bentley scandal has erupted. Stephen Powell, who leads Lion of Light Ministries in Pineville, North Carolina, released a public statement last week saying he has evidence that Bentley has been engaging in inappropriate sexual behavior with both men and women over the past few years. Powell, an estranged protégé of Bentley’s, says he took his accusations to Rick Joyner and that Joyner didn’t do anything to protect the people hurt by Bentley.

Powell said he had evidence that, among other things, Bentley

solicited sex from a male intern for money, asked a female intern for nude photos and engaged in binge drinking after revival meetings.

“I believe Todd has proven over more than two decades of ministry, moral failures and abuse of others that he cannot be trusted with the care of God’s people,” said Powell in an Aug. 22 post on Facebook. “I believe Todd is not fit for public ministry. On top of his sexual sins, he has proven to be a compulsive liar, he lacks financial integrity when handling God’s money and he is a substance abuser that has drawn many others into these sins with him over the years.”

Bentley posted a rambling response to his former associate on Aug. 23. While admitting that he does “have a past,” he called Powell’s charges gossip and hearsay. “The majority of these accusations are absolutely not true. Not all, but the majority,” Bentley said. “However, there are some that are true, some that even are partial truths. Much are exaggerated and are based on personal speculation.”

Joyner also posted a video response, saying he completed Bentley’s restoration process in 2012 and no longer provides spiritual covering for him. Joyner also accused Powell of “witchcraft” for coming forward with the embarrassing charges.

This ugly scandal, which feels like deja vu all over again, has triggered numerous questions from ministry leaders and people in the pews about how to deal with preachers who fail morally. How long is a restoration process? How long should a fallen leader step out of ministry? Should there be a “three strikes and you’re out” rule? Is a leader ever permanently disqualified?

Obviously, the Bible offers all Christians forgiveness after a serious failure—and Galatians 6:1a (NASB) calls us to restore anyone who is “caught in any trespass.” But does that mean we automatically put fallen leaders back in their positions, even

if their sins hurt people deeply? And what if the leaders don't exhibit true repentance?

Prophet and author Loren Sanford stepped into the discussion this week and posted a sobering video response to the Todd Bentley scandal—and he didn't dilute his message with cheap grace. Sanford actually said Bentley should never have been allowed to go back into ministry after his 2008 failure.

"If Todd had been under my care," Sanford said in a Facebook video posted on Aug. 26, "he would never have been allowed to stand on a stage again. Based on what he did, I don't believe he can ever make his current marriage right. That doesn't mean I reject him as a Christian. I would accept him in the church as a layperson, but never again as a leader."

I totally agree. I would never tell anyone that they are beyond the reach of God's forgiveness. I can accept Todd Bentley as my brother in Christ even if he has made horrible mistakes. But that doesn't mean I would trust him to lead a ministry—especially if he has not shown the necessary signs of repentance.

Paul warned Timothy not to lay hands on a young leader too quickly because he would "share responsibility for the sins of others" (see 1 Tim. 5:22). That means if we put a leader in a position of influence when we know he has the potential for harm, we are partly to blame for his abuses.

This latest situation is a disaster—for Bentley, for the interns and other associates who were hurt by him, and for the countless people who followed Bentley for a second time. When the Lakeland Revival crumbled in 2008, many people quit church altogether because they felt defrauded. Now it has happened again. And it makes the charismatic church look foolish, because we don't have systems in place to protect people from leaders who look great on stage but secretly live in sin.

Personally, I blame the system for this current mess. We

charismatics are more enamored with “the anointing” than character. We run after healings and miracles, even if they are questionably manufactured. We chase gold dust, feathers, goosebumps and smackdowns instead of holiness, biblical revelation and true repentance. We are addicted to hype.

More than a decade ago some people put Todd Bentley on a pedestal because he claimed to have exotic supernatural powers—and many didn’t care that he abandoned one wife for another. Now we are paying for that folly. It remains to be seen whether we will clean up our act this time. {eoa}

An Open Letter to Today’s Young Leaders

This week, I’m hosting 16 guys in my home for a spiritual retreat. They are coming from nine states and one foreign country for three days of fellowship, teaching, prayer, hiking and Georgia barbecue. It will not be a one-way conversation. While I have some important advice to share, I’ll be listening more than talking.

These guys represent the future leaders of the church. If you are in your 20s or 30s, so do you. I hope you will read this and pass it on to your friends.

Since my father passed away last year, I’ve been very aware of the brevity of life. I know my days are numbered. That’s why I spend so much of my time mentoring the next generation, both men and women. I won’t be around too much longer. So my job is to do whatever I can to help young leaders prepare for their own unique challenges.

This week when my young friends come to my house, we will spend all our study time in Paul's second epistle to Timothy. Some scholars call this letter "Paul's last will and testament" because he knew he would be stepping into eternity soon. He also knew Timothy would soon be hurled into the deep waters of spiritual responsibility even though he didn't feel ready for the challenge.

Paul was passing the baton to his beloved spiritual son. The apostle had done everything he could to prepare him, but now it was Timothy's time to shine. Paul gave Timothy five directives. I'm passing along these instructions to today's emerging leaders—because if you don't heed Paul's advice you will drop the ball.

If you are called to be a leader, take time to read 2 Timothy this week and ask the Lord to prepare you for this adventure.

1. **Be bold.** Paul advised Timothy: "God has not given us a spirit of timidity" (1:7a, NASB). Leaders can't be fearful. That doesn't mean you won't have weak knees or anxious thoughts when you step out of your comfort zone. It doesn't mean you won't feel butterflies before you speak publicly. But you must swallow hard and go forward anyway. Someone must go first. If you have surrendered to the call to leadership, you must bravely push your fears aside. God can change a wimp into a warrior.
2. **Be strong.** Paul told his spiritual son: "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2:1b). Paul wrote those words from a filthy Roman prison. He probably had iron cuffs on his wrists, and maybe lice crawling on his body. Paul was toughened by hardship and suffering. Every leader must be tested by adversity. If you can't take the stress and the anguish that spiritual leadership requires, don't try it.

Today's younger generation has been babied. Because of

fatherlessness, helicopter parenting, the opioid crisis, video games and a myriad of toxic cultural pressures, many young adults are insecure, depressed, full of anxiety, confused about gender and sexuality, and afraid of responsibility. “Strong” almost sounds like a bad word today. But somebody must rise up and be strong to make a change. You have been chosen!

3. **Stay true to God’s Word.** Paul instructed Timothy: “Preach the word ... for the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine” (4:2-3a). Many leaders in the previous generation failed to preserve biblical morality. Many churches today are crumbling because we modified our theology to match popular culture instead of just preaching God’s timeless truths. (Please forgive my generation for thinking that we could vote to change God’s Word.)

How will churches grapple with issues such as sexual behavior, social justice, respect for life and the transgender movement over the next 30 years? Those topics are now in the hands of younger leaders. The ball is in your court. We need preachers of righteousness to resist today’s onslaught of deception and apostasy.

4. **Make disciples.** Paul told Timothy: “The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2:2). Notice Paul did not push Timothy to build big buildings or reach huge crowds. Paul stressed quality over quantity. He knew the best way to build a faithful church is to start with a few authentic disciples and then multiply them.

I tell the men and women I am mentoring: Please don’t get addicted to the applause of a crowd. Big audiences will make you feel good about yourself, but they can also walk away from you without warning. God wants faithful followers who have the

ability to reproduce more followers. Never measure your success by the number of people in seats.

5. **Stay on fire.** Paul also told his spiritual son: “Kindle afresh the gift of God which is in you by the laying on of my hands” (1:6b). What’s the secret to spiritual passion? I have never met a devoted Christian who didn’t spend lots of time alone with God. It was Moses’ secret. It was David’s secret. You must find the cleft of the rock. You must pray, read the Scriptures and pursue intimacy with the Holy Spirit if you want your spiritual fire to stay ablaze.

Paul was saying, “Stay lit!” You cannot lead God’s people if your embers are cold. This is the problem with so much of today’s church—we have “professional” leaders who aren’t filled with the Holy Spirit. They rely on intellect, gimmicks, church growth strategies and human ability rather than trusting God’s power. That might last a few years, but nothing will last if the branches are not continually connected to the vine.

As a father in the Lord, I am urging you: Be bold, be strong, stay true to God’s Word, make disciples and stay on fire. Soon you will be handing the baton to another generation. Please be faithful with what Jesus has charged you to do!

Don’t Believe the Lie That Christianity Isn’t Growing

I’m sure you’ve never heard of Mary Larios. For years she ran a small cantina near Rio Hondo, Guatemala. But after her conversion to Jesus Christ, she went back to the community of

Sunzapote, 20 miles from her house, to share her faith with relatives. Today, about 40 people attend the Bible studies Mary has organized. With the help of her pastor in Rio Hondo, Otoniel Morales, she is buying land to build the first Protestant church in Sunzapote.

When I came to visit the town in early July, the new converts and some curious spectators joined us for an impromptu worship service under a tree. There was nothing impressive about this moment, at least by the world's standards. Most of the people there were single mothers with children. All of them live below poverty level. As I poured some oil on a rock to dedicate the land for the new congregation, I wept as I realized how God cares about the people and places we typically ignore.

And I rejoiced that I could see with my own eyes how the gospel is spreading—slow and steady—in a time when skeptics claim Christianity is fading. It's fashionable in America today to bash Christians. The mainstream media insists faith is irrelevant and churches will soon go the way of eight-track tape players. But the facts say otherwise. Christian faith is growing, especially in the developing world.

I've visited Guatemala more than 10 times, and it's obvious faith is on the rise there. In 1991, about 19% of the population attended evangelical churches. Today that number has grown as high as 30%. Almost every time I've visited, I've been a part of a dedication service for a new church. This same growth is happening in many parts of the world:

- • Over the past 100 years in Africa, Christianity has grown from 10% of the population to 25%.
- • Asia's Christian population is expected to grow from 350 million to 460 million by the year 2025, based on current growth rates. It is estimated that more people in China attend church on any given Sunday than in the United States.

- • Iran is experiencing an unusual visitation of the Holy Spirit. One ministry reportedly receives more than 700 requests for information about Jesus from Iranians every day. In spite of intense persecution, an underground house church movement is sweeping the Muslim country.
- • In Algeria, which has been staunchly Muslim for centuries, a similar house church movement is growing. After the government recently closed 11 churches, an Algerian pastor told reporters: “The more problems the church faces, the stronger it grows.”

We often hear dire warnings that Christianity in America is in decline. But a recent study throws that theory into question. While noting that many mainline churches are closing their doors, the report by Harvard University and Indiana University says the number of Americans who attend church more than once a week, pray daily and read the Bible regularly is actually steady.

The same study found that evangelicals grew from 1972—when they were 18% of the population—to about 28% from the late 1980s to 2016. Over the same time, mainline churches declined from 35 to 12%. Religion in America, the Harvard study says, enjoys “persistent and exceptional intensity.”

Glenn Stanton is the author of an important new book, *The Myth of the Dying Church* (Hachette). He is full of hope that Christian faith, regardless of how it is persecuted by dictators, maligned by the media or misrepresented by churchgoers themselves, is still moving forward. Stanton says, “The bottom line is this: faithful Christianity—that which takes the Bible at its word, believes Jesus really is God, that He died on a real cross, rose from a real grave and offers real freedom from real sin to all who ask—is doing quite well.”

When I was in Guatemala in July, I went back and read what Jesus said about the growth of His church. He compared His

kingdom to a tiny mustard seed. Although it is “smaller than all other seeds,” Jesus said, “when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches” (Matt. 13:32, NASB).

What we do for the Lord will not impress the world. Our steps are small, and our seeds are tiny. Sometimes it seems our growth is plagued by setbacks. But you can take courage. In the end, those who mock God will be surprised when they see the size and the impact of the final global harvest.

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Beware of the Latest New Age Deception

It's not surprising to find a New Age guru in the nation of Sri Lanka. But when that same guru mixes Christian faith, the Lord's Supper and prophetic revelation with New Age teachings,

you can understand why church leaders around the world are concerned.

The man at the center of this controversy is Kirby de Lanerolle, 44, a Sri Lankan who says he was raised in the Methodist Church. Today he leads WOW Life Church in the capital city of Colombo. (WOW stands for “Works of Wonder.”) His growing crowd of followers say his ministry is accompanied by unusual miracles including instant weight loss, gray hair turning black, gold dust and cash appearing supernaturally in wallets.

But de Lanerolle’s trademark is his revelation of “breatherianism”—the belief that humans don’t need food to exist. Basing his ideas on ancient Eastern philosophy, de Lanerolle believes he receives most of his nutrition from vibrations of energy as well as sunlight. He also takes daily Communion, and claims that Jesus was a breatharian because He fasted for 40 days.

De Lanerolle’s teachings obviously appeal to people who struggle with their weight—and this may explain why he’s gaining popularity in the United States. De Lanerolle claims to be able to “impart” to others the ability to tap into spiritual vibrations so they lose their appetite for food.

“Jesus said man does not live by bread alone,” de Lanerolle says in one of his video teachings on YouTube, “but by every vibration frequency of God.” He calls Holy Communion a “superfood” and claims that he once ran a half marathon after fasting for two months.

Making things even weirder, de Lanerolle teaches what is known as “immortality on earth,” the belief that humans can live forever. He claims to have secret revelation about this concept, and he draws his inspiration from the teachings of a controversial charismatic preacher named Kobus van Rensburg of South Africa. (Ironically, van Rensburg died of cancer in

2013. He was directly tied to the controversial Nigerian minister T.B. Joshua.)

De Lanerolle does not expect to keep his unusual brand of spirituality in Sri Lanka. He is spreading it abroad, and he will lead a five-day retreat on breatharianism in Missouri in September. He is now also linked to some leaders in the charismatic revival stream, and he is scheduled to speak at a charismatic conference in Pennsylvania this fall.

Some Christian leaders in India issued a warning about de Lanerolle back in 2015 after he visited Bangalore and Chennai. "We are of the opinion that since Kirby's teachings are clearly not in line with the word of truth; he ... has to be evaluated not on the basis of the signs and wonders but on the basis of the doctrine he believes in and teaches," said Jeyakaran Emmanuel, a spokesman for a coalition of Indian pastors known as the Grace and Truth Coalition.

"Kirby may be a sincere follower of Christ, but he is sincerely wrong in such unbiblical teachings such as immortality on earth and breatharianism," Emmanuel said.

Most thinking people would agree it's dangerous to teach that food isn't necessary. That alone could be the foundation for a Jim Jones-style cult. But de Lannerole also teaches universalism ("All religions point to one place," he has said) and that human beings are evolving into gods. In one of his recorded messages, he says, "We are all in the process of evolution. I believe in evolution. We are all in the process of evolution into being God Himself."

Pastor Ivor Poobalan of the Kollupitiya Methodist Church in Sri Lanka preached a bold message in July 2019 about the spread of heresy in the modern church. In a sermon posted online, he warns his members about de Lanerolle's strange teachings and laments that pastors of 500 Sri Lankan churches have come under the "covering" of WOW Life Church, which now

claims to be the largest denomination in the country.

“Some years ago, Kirby claimed that God sent angels to reset his DNA and made his body capable of living without food,” Pastor Poobalan says. “This has now led to the most reckless teaching that is central to WOW Life, the promise of immortality on earth. The followers are now promised that they are the first generation of Christians that will physically live on and not die until Jesus returns in the future.”

How can someone with such strange, unbiblical beliefs be welcomed into a Christian conference? It’s obvious that discernment in the church today is at a low point. In many charismatic circles today, we chase after anyone who can perform miracles—no matter how bizarre. We’ve lost the ability to spot an impostor.

The apostle Paul warned the Corinthians about “false apostles” and “deceitful workers” who “disguise themselves as servants of righteousness” (see 2 Cor. 11:13,15, NASB). Paul was willing to mark such men as dangerous instruments of Satan. Today we are too nice to judge. We give the false prophets a microphone and pay them an honorarium.

Satan is busy trying to unleash a new wave of deception in the church. Don’t buy it. Please warn your friends not to expose themselves to Kirby de Lanerolle’s teachings—or to anyone who spreads similar New Age doctrines designed to turn people’s hearts away from Jesus. {eo}

The Global Spiritual Trend We

Can't Ignore

Last weekend, I preached in a small but growing church in central Sri Lanka. There was no sign outside the building because it's a private residence located in a crowded neighborhood. Most of the people who came to this meeting either walked or arrived in motorized rickshaws, so no parking lot was needed. The worship team consisted of two young men playing guitars and a third guy on a box drum.

The small living room of this modest home had been transformed into a sanctuary, and the 40 or so people who came to worship sat on plastic chairs or on the stairway. I didn't need a microphone. This church doesn't use a sound system, a projection screen or fancy lighting. Yet God's presence was tangible, especially when several people stood to pray for the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

The pastor of this congregation (I'll call him Sires) works a regular job during the week—he doesn't take a salary from the church's limited income. That's fine with him because he wants to be in the marketplace all week, getting to know the community. He also regularly shares his faith when he plays cricket with a group of non-Christian guys.

Sires doesn't expect his church to stay in a house forever. He plans to grow. But he also plans to train and release his members to start more new churches—in a Buddhist nation where churches were bombed by Muslim terrorists on Easter Sunday in April.

Researchers say what Sires is doing represents the future of the global church. In places like Iran, Algeria, India and China, thousands of ordinary people are starting small churches that don't fit the traditional mold. Most of them are not affiliated with recognized denominations, so it's impossible to count them. These organic church groups meet not

only in homes but in coffee shops, offices, campus dorms, hotels, apartment building lobbies, front yards or under trees. And they are multiplying rapidly.

House churches are certainly not a new concept. Jesus had His first meeting with his disciples in a home (see John 1:38-39), the first Jewish believers of Christ met “house to house” (Acts 2:46) and the first Gentile church began in the house of Cornelius in Caesarea. But in recent years, missions researchers have noticed that non-traditional “disciple-making movements,” or DMMs, are exploding around the world, especially in countries where Christians are persecuted.

This trend was best explained at first by David Garrison, a Southern Baptist who wrote *Church Planting Movements* in 1999 and *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims Around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ* in 2014. That same year, missionary strategist David Watson wrote *Contagious Disciple Making*. Both men did a masterful job of documenting this global church growth that is happening under the radar.

As I was worshiping with the small group of believers in Sri Lanka, I could sense that the Holy Spirit is calling the American church to study and learn from these humble foreign believers who have reclaimed a Book of Acts model. This doesn't mean our traditional churches should go away or that we all will stop meeting in church buildings. But the wind is shifting. Methods we used just 10 years ago have become embarrassingly ineffective. Our “box” may work for some people, but we need fresh strategies.

In the United States, we've developed a church model that discourages authentic New Testament discipleship. We assume that just because we have cool stage lights, huge projection screens and contemporary worship music, we are on the cutting edge of what God is doing. But the truth is we are stuck in an old-fashioned rut.

We are building monolithic, top-down structures instead of spreading the gospel outwardly in multiple directions. We are afraid to empower people to branch out into their own ministries because we need everyone to stay in their padded seats to support a system that is expensive and underperforming.

I suspect God is about to prune the Western church so we can bear more fruit. The Lord of the harvest wants His church to grow exponentially. Adopting these new methods will infuriate the religious establishment, but we can't allow status quo thinking to keep us in the box. We need new wineskins to reach our changing culture. Our brothers and sisters overseas have a lesson for us.

When Is It Time to Leave a Church?

A friend of mine from England recently asked me for counsel regarding a serious dilemma. His pastor had been involved in extramarital affairs, yet the man never stepped down after the scandal. My friend grew increasingly uncomfortable. Then he became alarmed when the embattled pastor announced he was going to lay hands on every church member during a weekend service to impart "special revelation."

This pastor had a base of loyal fans, but the Sunday crowd was dwindling because people could smell trouble. They knew it wasn't right for this man to remain in leadership without receiving some serious personal ministry. I advised my friend to run for the door.

I've never found a perfect church in all my travels—and it

certainly wouldn't be perfect if I joined it. But there are some churches that deserve to be called unhealthy. Though I believe we shouldn't give up on a church too fast, there are some warning signs that should cause you to stop and ask if you'd be better off finding better pasture.

1. **No accountability.** There is safety in the multitude of counselors (see Prov. 11:14). There is much less safety—perhaps even danger—when a leader runs a church in total isolation. All leaders should be team players. They should seek counsel from peers as well as from gray-haired men and women who have the wisdom that comes with experience. If a pastor or church leader isn't open to correction or financial oversight, he is headed for a train wreck. If you stay in that church, you may crash with him.
2. **Spiritual elitism.** Healthy leaders love the entire body of Christ. Beware of any church that claims “exclusive” revelation or suggests it is superior to other Christians. This is how cults start. If a pastor ever makes such claims, it is time to shake the dust off your feet and move on.
3. **Entrenched immorality.** The apostle Paul commanded leaders to enforce biblical discipline. This must be handled with gentleness (see Gal. 6:1) but nevertheless with firm resolve, because the enemy wants to infiltrate the church with moral compromise. If a pastor has been involved in adultery or perversion and continues preaching, meanwhile refusing discipline, his unrepentant spirit will infect the entire congregation—and you can expect to see immorality spread throughout the church. Don't be defiled.
4. **An authoritarian spirit.** I'm amazed at how much spiritual abuse is tolerated in churches today. No pastor is perfect, and we are called to be patient with

each other's faults. But if a church leader is verbally abusive toward his staff or members of his congregation, he is in direct violation of Scripture. The apostle Paul taught that church leaders should not be "violent" or "quarrelsome" but "self-controlled" and "gentle" (see 1 Tim. 3:2-3, ESV). It's best to find another pastor if yours cannot control his anger or if he is unwilling to repent of a dictatorial style.

5. **Unbridled greed.** Paul made it clear that a leader has no business being in the ministry if he isn't "free from the love of money" (1 Tim. 3:3b, NASB). Yet we have turned that requirement on its head today. We have given greedy charlatans access to the airwaves and allowed them to corrupt the church with a money-focused message. Your pastor does not have to live in poverty, but if he insists on living in luxury—and manipulates people during offering time to squeeze more money out of your wallet to pay for his toys—you are supporting his habit.
6. **False doctrines and manifestations.** A pastor should be open to the Holy Spirit's spontaneous work, but he or she should also protect the flock from deception. In many segments of the charismatic movement today, bizarre New Age influences have been wholeheartedly embraced—and Christians seem to have thrown away the gift of discernment. If your church is focusing on a particular prophet's revelations, or is going off on weird tangents—at the expense of solid doctrine—then you should go elsewhere fast.
7. **A culture of pride.** Some church leaders are so insecure that they manufacture a sense of importance around them in order to function. They surround themselves with security guards, "armor bearers," handlers and assistants—and never actually build genuine relationships with their church members. They think church is all about their stage performance, so they

rely on volume, theatrics, clothes and a grand entrance to impress the crowd rather than just being normal, touchable, accessible servants.

If your pastor is building a personality cult rather than a dwelling place for God, get out before you become a casualty! {eoa}

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The Holy Spirit Can Heal Your Damaged Identity

So many people I know struggle with a damaged self-image. They want to believe God loves them, but their negative experiences have programmed them to reject the truth. Maybe this has been your experience. You want to believe the Bible, but on most days, you think you are a failure, stupid, weak, inferior, disqualified or unlovable.

How can you stop these wrong patterns of thinking? You must listen to what God says about you. Romans 12:2b says: “Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” There are so many Scriptures that describe your true identity. Meditate on the Bible verses below so you can overcome the lies you have believed about yourself. Speak these words regularly and let them heal your self-image:

1. I am loved. Jeremiah 31:3b (NIV) says, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with

unfailing kindness." God's love for me is so great it is difficult to fathom. It will take all of eternity to fully comprehend how great His love is. In spite of my mistakes, my weaknesses and my sins, God is kind and merciful and He loves me unconditionally.

2. I am a child of God. My Father delights in me as a son or daughter. He is not angry with me. My loving Father accepts me and celebrates me. Ephesians 1:6b (NKJV) says, "He made us accepted in the beloved." I am welcome in my Father's house!
3. I am forgiven. I have been washed in the blood of Christ. I am clean. He does not keep a file of my sins. He has purged everything from my record! He even chose to forget my sins! Ephesians 1:7 says, "We have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace."
4. I am blameless. When God looks at me, He sees the righteousness of Jesus, not my sins! He took my filthy garments and gave me a new robe of righteousness. Ephesians 1:4b (NASB) says He chose us before the foundation of the world, "that we would be holy and blameless before Him."
5. I have been adopted. The Father wanted me in His family. He paid the ultimate price so I could be His child. He drew me from far away so I could live with Him forever. I belong to Him! Romans 8:15 (CSB) says I have "received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, 'Abba, Father.'" I can call God my "Daddy"!
6. I am an heir with Christ. I have a spiritual inheritance. Everything that belongs to the Father has been given to me. God does not withhold his goodness from me. Romans 8:17 (NASB) says I am an "heir of God" and a "fellow heir with Christ." Ephesians 1:3 says we have been blessed with every spiritual blessing in

Christ.

7. I am free from sin. Sin doesn't have power over me. I can flee from temptation. Romans 6:18 says I am now a "slave of righteousness" because I've been freed from my past sins and addictions. 2 Corinthians 5:17 says if anyone is in Christ, the old things in my life have passed away and "all things have become new."
8. I am victorious. I am not just a conqueror. Romans 8:37 says I am "more than a conqueror" because of Him who loved us. Because of the victory that Christ won on the cross for me, I have also overcome sin and death. 1 John 4:4 says, "Greater is He who is in you than He who is in the world." The devil has been defeated!
9. I am the temple of the Holy Spirit. God's Holy Spirit lives in me, according to 1 Corinthians 6:19. I am never alone. God's presence is always with me because His Holy Spirit abides in me forever. And Jesus promised He will never leave me or forsake me. He will never take His Holy Spirit from me.
10. I have received power. I've been filled with the Holy Spirit. Now I can lay hands on the sick and see them healed. I can cast out demons. I have authority over all the devil's power. Jesus said in Luke 10:19b: "I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy."
11. I am a spiritual warrior. I wear the armor of God. I have the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit. The devil will not be able to defeat me. Ephesians 6:10 says I am strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might! Even when I feel weak, I am strong because the Holy Spirit empowers me.
12. I have the peace of God. I will not be shaken by worry, fear or anxiety. God comforts me and calms my fears.

Philippians 4:7 says the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard my heart and my mind in Christ Jesus. I am not controlled by fear. Psalm 118:6 says: "The Lord is for me; I will not fear."

13. I am guided by God's Spirit. The Lord is my Shepherd, and He leads me and guides me. I can hear His still, gentle voice. Psalm 32:8 promises me: "I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go." God directs my steps, gives me wisdom and helps me make the right choices.
14. I am full of God's joy. My joy is not based on circumstances. I can rejoice no matter what is going on in my life. When I feel discouraged, Nehemiah 8:10c promises: "The joy of the Lord is your strength." Even when I go through hard times, I know the pain will not last forever. I have the promise of Psalm 30:5b: "Weeping may last for the night, but a shout of joy comes in the morning."
15. I am an ambassador for Christ. I can reconcile others to Jesus Christ. Everywhere I go, people will be drawn to Jesus. 2 Corinthians 5:20 says God has made me an ambassador. And 2 Corinthians 3:6 says God has made me an adequate minister of the New Covenant. I am qualified, not because of my own abilities but because God has qualified me!
16. I am God's masterpiece. God created me for a special purpose. He will use me to do good works that will bring glory to the Father. Ephesians 2:10 says I am God's "workmanship"—which means "masterpiece." I am on a divine assignment and I will fulfill God's mission for my life!
17. I am blessed. God sees me and cares for me. He is a good Father. He provides for my daily needs. Luke 6:38 says when I give to others, God will give to me "pressed

down, shaken together, and running over.” I will experience His supernatural provision. And Philippians 4:19 says, “My God will supply all of [my] needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

18. I am growing as a disciple. I am growing more stable every day because Jesus is my foundation. When I feel weak, confused, unstable or tormented, I will find peace and stability in Christ, who is my refuge. Colossians 2:7 says I am “firmly rooted, and now being built up in Him and established in [my] faith.” Because I have strong roots in Christ, I will bear much fruit for God.
19. I always have access to His grace. Jesus has given me strength for every trial I face. He promises me in 2 Corinthians 12:9b: “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” There will always be enough strength to face each day, no matter how weak I feel. God’s grace will never run out!
20. I will live forever with Christ. Romans 6:23b says, “The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Because my faith is in Jesus, I will spend eternity in the presence of God. Revelation 21:27 says my name has been written in the Lamb’s book of life, therefore I will dwell in the heavenly city with Christ when this life is over.

Print out this list of Scriptures and declare these truths over your life regularly. Let the Word of God transform the way you see yourself!

Why I Can't Defend Everything Trump Tweets

President Trump has never launched a nuclear attack, but his words this week triggered a virtual war. Responding to four Democratic congresswomen who have been critical of his immigration policies, Trump tweeted on July 15 that the women—Rep. Ilhan Omar of Minnesota, Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts, Rashida Talaib of Michigan and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez of New York—should “go back” to the countries they came from.

The tweets sparked outrage. Critics called his words blatant racism. But the president defended himself, even after Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi said Trump was “xenophobic” and Omar said his message was “stoking white nationalism.” The uproar has dominated the headlines for the past 48 hours.

This happens every few weeks. President Trump uses Twitter to smack his political enemies, and they smack him back publicly. The language gets ugly. Then it really gets weird when Christians who voted for Trump feel they must defend every word he says, no matter how crass or insensitive.

I try to avoid political topics in this column because I absolutely hate the nastiness and divisiveness of our current political climate. I don't want to stir up more anger. Hateful people on both sides of our cultural divide are ripping this nation to shreds. I'm sick of it.

But it's obvious we will not have a truce. Lines are drawn, knives are sharpened and the torches are lit as we head into the 2020 presidential race. We might as well brace for many more months of outrage. You can forget the days of civil discourse. People today want blood.

I've always tried to be a “kingdom Christian”—that is, a

follower of Christ whose primary allegiance is not to a political party but to biblical values. My trust is certainly not in Trump, any more than it was in Obama, Bush 2, Clinton, Bush 1 or Ronald Reagan (who was my favorite president because he was conservative, tough and a gentleman).

There was a time when Democrats and Republicans got along. We actually share a lot of the same wholesome values—especially a belief in democracy and a love for the core freedoms that made this nation great, including freedom of the press and freedom of religion.

But those shared values have been trampled today. We are polarized. Some Republicans are so adamant about policing the Mexican border that they've lost all compassion for immigrants. And some Democrats are so intent on "reproductive freedom" that they pass laws to kill full-term babies at birth.

Some Republicans are so pro-business that they have no concern for the poor. Some Democrats want to raise the tax rate to 70 percent and outlaw capitalism so they can turn America into Venezuela.

Don't lecture me about who has the moral high ground. If God examined the scales—and you can be sure He does—both Republicans and Democrats would be found wanting. Do you get upset when Republicans push for stricter immigration laws and resort to mistreating the children of border-crossers? I do. But I also hate the fact that limitless Democrat-sponsored abortions have resulted in the genocide of African-Americans.

Our political polarization has turned us into hypocrites. You can't be pro-immigrant and pro-abortion. And you can't be pro-life and anti-immigrant. In the kingdom of God, we value all life.

There is no question there are white supremacists who favor the Republican Party. But there are also fascists on the far-

left side of the Democratic Party who would be happy to see evangelical Christians wiped off the face of the earth. These atheistic, anti-God activists hate anyone who doesn't share their goal of eliminating the traditional view of gender and marriage. These radicals cry, "Racism!" yet they are just as bigoted as the bigots they hate.

The gospel of Jesus Christ opposes both right-wing racism and left-wing atheism. Let's stop acting like one party speaks for God. Samuel Rodriguez, leader of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, puts it this way: "Our hope as a nation isn't in the hands of a donkey or an elephant; our hope rests in the Lamb of God."

When I travel overseas, my international Christian friends often ask me how they should pray for America. They also ask me about Trump's angry tone, and they wonder if he hates immigrants. My response is that, as a Christian, I'm not going to defend every word that comes out of President Trump's mouth. His tweets are often rude. He should ask a mature member of his staff to edit them before he tosses them like grenades.

But I also tell my friends overseas that I'm not going to support Trump's opposition just because liberals claim moral superiority. In many cases, the actions of leftists are as evil as anything they have accused Trump of doing.

Ultimately, I remind my international friends that Jesus didn't take sides in the political debate. Instead, He taught us to pray in Matthew 6:10: "Your kingdom come; Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven." No election, no political party and certainly no tweet will be able to bring heaven on earth. So prayer will be my priority throughout this tumultuous season.

Never Build a Ministry on One Man's Swag

John the Baptist said he was not worthy to untie Jesus' lowly sandals. But in today's megachurch culture, a preacher's footwear has become very pricey. So pricey, in fact, that a new Instagram account called *preachersnsneakers* went viral in April and now has over 163,000 followers. The social media account does nothing except offer photos of famous preachers' expensive and colorful footwear—including a pair of red Air Yeezy 2s worn by South Carolina pastor John Gray. His shoes retail for \$5,611.

Some people have complained about the Instagram site, claiming that its founder, an anonymous guy named "Tyler," is hurting the church. But he says he's simply holding up a mirror and asking Christians if our leaders should be known for their lavish tastes in clothes.

There's really nothing new about this. In the 1980s, televangelists were criticized for their three-piece suits and pricey Italian leather dress shoes—and we know their followers gave them enough money to buy them private jets. Today, the suits and leather shoes are out of date, but the price tag on the designer sneakers is the same. In today's vocabulary, it's called "swag." It basically means "stylish confidence," and it comes from the word "swagger."

Like the televangelist of the old days, the celebrity preacher of today may still be on television—or he may have his own YouTube channel. But his look has been totally updated. His hairstyle is hip, he has a few days' stubble on his face, and his ministry has an app for your smartphone. And apparently

his onstage wardrobe must now include a pair of \$1,000 Air Jordans.

I'm not against hair gel, stubble or designer athletic shoes. I enjoy some of these preachers' podcasts. And, in their defense, some of these men received their fancy footwear as gifts from wealthy donors. But I am concerned about the swag factor. Technology and youthful trendiness can breed pride if we're not careful. And pride is still pride, whether it's clothed in yesterday's neon polyester or today's ripped jeans.

As ministry platforms grow larger, the potential for bigger egos grows more dangerous. Let's take the humility test. We need less swag and more brokenness in the pulpit. Let's remember these basic biblical principles as we choose whom to follow:

Christians should never worship preachers. Paul rebuked the people of Lystra when they called him and his companion Barnabas gods. Paul told the people: "We are also men of the same nature as you" (Acts 14:15b, NASB). True ministers of God will not allow their followers to place them on pedestals. Paul knew his proper role was to take the lowest seat, as a bondservant of Christ Jesus (see Phil. 1:1). He also knew that ministers must never allow flattery or adoration to inflate their egos.

Preachers must know who they are and who they aren't. When people spread a rumor that John the Baptist was the Messiah, he corrected them and said: "I am not the Christ. ... He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:28b, 30, MEV).

Even some of the most gifted Christian communicators can be seduced by the power of technology—and by the roar of a crowd—so that they actually believe they are in an elite category. No! We are nothing and He is everything. We must get out of the way so people can see Jesus!

Leaders who have not crucified the lust for self-promotion can

become infatuated with the big and the sensational. They can build big churches with bigger projection screens, yet their character cannot sustain the pressure of spiritual warfare that inevitably comes. An out-of-control ego becomes a monster. Author Henry Blackaby said it this way: "Nothing is more pathetic than having a small character in a big assignment. Many of us don't want to give attention to our character; we just want the big assignment from God."

Ministry is best accomplished with a team, not a celebrity.

Paul laid the foundations of the church in the Gentile world, but he always shared the spotlight with Timothy, Silas, Barnabas, Titus, Phoebe, Priscilla and other co-workers—who suffered in prison with him. He didn't try to be five places at once; he trained people to take his place. And nobody on the team had swag! Never build a ministry on one man's charisma.

Our ultimate goal should be for a whole new generation of people to be trained and empowered to serve, not for one man to build a show around his gift. And certainly not around his expensive Air Jordans. {eoa}

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