

Why Pastors Need to Stop Building Empires Instead of God's Kingdom

Editor's Note: This is part 1 of a two-part series. Watch for part 2, coming soon.

Ever since the divide of the Western and Eastern branches of Christianity in the 11th century, two of the greatest fears of once-united Christendom have been realized: fragmentation and division. Even in the 16th century, when Martin Luther's protest against the Roman Catholic Church's abuses sparked the Protestant Reformation, leaders hoped there would be only a few major expressions of the body of Christ. Never in their wildest dreams did the reformers envision all the denominations and various branches and networks of Christianity that have evolved since then. The end results have provided an opportunity for a spirit of lawlessness, independence, and empire-building among some insecure (albeit gifted) leaders.

It is not my purpose to judge whether all these expressions are of God or not. However, the following list will reveal some signs when the motivation to build a church, ministry or network is akin to the human race's attempt to build its own empire, epitomized by the Tower of Babel—which God judged and scattered across the whole earth (Gen. 11:1-18).

In 1 Kings 11:11 and 12:16, God divided the kingdom of Israel because of religious apostasy, which is the same reason the Roman Catholic Church was corrected and fragmented (too much concentration of power in the hands of humans, who deviated from the true way of Jesus and the apostles). God will judge His church and hold back revival from certain churches, ministries and regions when their key spiritual leaders are

attempting to build themselves empires instead of God's kingdom. Such leaders may talk the talk, but their actions often speak louder than their so-called "kingdom-first" words.

The following are 17 signs you are an empire builder instead of a kingdom builder:

1. You rejoice when other key leaders in your region are struggling.

Although all leaders say with their mouths that they are sad when another church, pastor or leader in their area is struggling, I have observed that some leaders seem to privately gloat or compare themselves with other failing leaders in their area. Whether the failing church or leader is right or wrong, it never pleases God when we internally rejoice or gloat when the body of Christ is not advancing in our region.

2. You are territorial and only work with those under your "covering"

Some leaders and denominations I know will only do outreaches with churches and leaders with whom they have a ministerial and financial allegiance. If we are going to reach our communities, we have to be willing to cross denominations and networks and work with the leaders who are sincerely committed to advancing the kingdom.

3. You only support events that can give you a platform.

I have seen leaders actually pull out of a citywide or community event because their names were not advertised on the program or because someone they are rivals with was part of the program. This shows that their concern was not advancing the kingdom but advancing their own name and empire-building goals.

4. You tend to exaggerate your own importance and influence with outsiders.

Empire builders treat their ministries like a sporting event. They are constantly throwing around numbers and statistics while comparing their numbers to the numbers of other ministers. They say things like, "We are growing in record numbers," "This was the most significant event in our city" or "We have the largest network in our city." Or worse yet, they claim something like, "Our ministry is the reason the crime rate went down in our community (or region)." Furthermore, they tend to exaggerate their influence, importance and results in their region or community.

In contrast, kingdom builders brag about what God is doing through His church in His city. They also attempt to applaud the success of others whose feet they wash, instead of propping themselves up for photo shoots and publicity. I have observed that several so-called revivals in our country in recent years have been more or less attributable to good advertising and marketing rather than a real move of God.

5. You are jealous of successful key leaders in your region.

I know I am with an empire builder when I am with a person who is always attempting to dig up dirt on other leaders, criticizing key leaders in their community or giving "faint praise" when asked about other key leaders in their region.

6. You speak about kingdom unity as a smokescreen to hide your own selfish agenda.

Some of the most self-centered empire builders I have known in the past four decades have spoken the most in public about the need for unity in the body of Christ. They use this kind of talk to get "sheep pastors and ministers" to forsake their own agendas and follow them to aid them in building their empires. They know the entire lingo and have the biblical passages down, but unfortunately, their actions do not correspond with their words and preaching.

7. Your name and picture must be highlighted in every event you participate in.

I have heard leaders speak about God raising up a movement of “nameless” and “faceless” people. Yet, in all their conferences, literature and advertising, their picture and name are highlighted more than anyone or anything else in the program. I attended one conference in which there was a life-size picture of the leader in the lobby, with the event and program advertised in small print under his picture!

8. You try to steal the loyalties of people connected to other ministries.

One of the key signs that someone is an empire builder is when they go after key leaders in other leaders’ churches or networks. I myself have had leaders in our Christ Covenant Coalition approached by another leader in our city, asking them to join his network as a representative, even though these leaders have been part of my leadership for over 10 years. When leaders do this, they make themselves look bad—both to the loyal leaders they approach and to the other key leaders in the city who eventually find out about the modus operandi of this empire builder.