

5 Signs of Idolatry in the Church

The greatest sin in the Bible is the sin of idolatry. It violates the first of the Ten Commandments: “You shall have no other gods before Me” (Ex. 20:3). Idolatry is when we put something or someone before the living and true God. It is the root cause of all other sins, which is why the first two commandments are based around this.

While the church today focuses on various sins related to human sexuality and lifestyle choices, many in the church who might not fit into these two categories might be deluded into believing they are OK. However, they might be breaking the greatest commandment.

Based on my perspective of serving as a lead pastor for almost 40 years and serving extensively in extra-local apostolic ministry to churches, here are the following signs that indicate idolatry.

1. **The idol of celebrity preachers.** Some believers traverse the country, attending the latest conferences of many well-known preachers. Often, when they meet them in person, they fawn and faint over them. Some prominent ministers (many of whom I know) cannot even go out in public without constantly being stopped by admirers so they can take “selfies” with them.

Although I am a proponent of having a culture of honor and respect for leaders who labor among us, some people have stepped over the edge into idolatry (Heb. 13:7-17). They follow everything these famous ministers say without question, even if the minister has been in a scandal. These believers fail to search the Scriptures themselves to see if what is being preached aligns with God’s Word.

When Cornelius met the apostle Peter, he bowed down before him; however, Peter rightly told him to get up and that he was only a man like Cornelius (see Acts 10). There is nothing wrong with emulating or following a leader, but there is something wrong with idolizing a Christian leader.

There is a pervasive “celebrity preacher” culture in the body of Christ today. Some megachurches and enterprises have even closed down their ministries when their celebrity preacher stepped down. If churches and ministries would build according to the New Testament pattern, in which the whole body exists to minister and edify one another in love, we would not depend upon one particular leader for the congregation to function (see Eph. 4:16, 1 Cor. 12).

2. **The idol of worship and entertainment.** Many believers flock to churches that have skilled singers and musicians primarily to be entertained. Consequently, many believers don’t realize they are putting self-gratification and entertainment before true worship.

In times past, churches were void of musical instruments. People would flock to those churches anyway, even though the congregation only used hymnals and sang a cappella. Today, it is very common for pastors to budget large amounts of money for the salary of professional singers and musicians with the hope that it will draw a large crowd on Sundays.

Even though we are called to worship with excellence and skill, we have gone too far in the church. We have mingled as a core value of pure worship to God with the entertainment culture of the world. At the end of the day, whether we have worship performed by professionals, use a recording or sing a cappella, congregations should worship and adore God for who He is. He is to be worshiped in spirit and truth, which is the only kind of worship God seeks (John 4:23-24).

Those who leave their local churches to attend other churches

with “better worship,” in my opinion, are often guilty of idolatry. Doing so indicates that they cannot worship God from their hearts since they need to be entertained by professionals.

3. **The idol of personal prosperity.** There are believers whose main motive is to use their faith to leverage influence with God for personal gain. Although God delights in blessing all of his children, Jesus told us to seek first His kingdom and righteousness for our material needs to be added to us (see 3 John 2, Matt. 6:33).

Many attempt to use God’s benevolent character to live a myopic life in which Christianity orbits around the universe of self. God has given us the power to get wealth so we can spread His covenant to the whole earth, not merely so we can live lives of ease. Using our faith to put our own needs first is a form of idolatry.

4. **The idol of objectifying God.** Although this point is similar to the previous point, I feel there is enough distinction to separate them. Through the years, I have seen many in the church preach and promote an “I,” “me,” “my” culture. For example, much of the preaching deals with self-actualization, fulfillment and therapy rather than sound biblical theology that calls believers to live a life of service. Pastors have often fed into the people’s cultural idolatry to attract them into the church. This certainly displeases God (Ezek. 44:10-12).

I have observed too few cross-carrying disciples attending churches and instead have seen many who use God when they need Him. For example, many come to church to “feel” the presence of God but are not committed to knowing and loving the person of God. Many come to church solely to feel good instead of being equipped to do good works (Eph. 2:10). Many come to receive a word instead of coming to give a word of edification

to someone else (Isa. 50:4, Eph. 4:29). Many come to listen to rhetorical messages that excite the emotions with no intention of walking out the word. Many come to shout amen, being psychologically deceived into believing that because they shouted, they have already obeyed.

Consequently, many believers live no differently than their unbelieving neighbors. This is one reason why megachurches are not always mega-cultural influencers and why church growth doesn't always result in personal and societal transformation.

Although many have attended church for decades, they have never matured and are still drinking pabulum, having never digested the meat of the word (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

5. The idol of ethnicity. Many believers have allowed their ethnicity and culture to trump the Word of God. Jesus said, in some people's lives, culture is even stronger than the word of God (Mark 7:7-8). Consequently, people read the Scriptures through their Caucasian-Western lens, Afrocentric lens, Hispanic lens, Asian lens and so on.

One of the most important things we as believers can do when it comes to receiving the Word of God is to take ourselves out of our cultural context. We must read the Bible through the eyes of the author's original intent, which is only accomplished with the Holy Spirit's help. There is no such thing as a Western European Caucasian Bible or an Afrocentric Bible.

We need to stop reading the Scriptures merely through our ethnic lenses because, in actuality, the Bible was written with a Hebraic mindset. It is foolish to think we can fully understand it with our contemporary perspectives. Consequently, believers often act and react no differently from nonbelievers regarding things that happen in modern society. For example, white, black and brown believers have

generally reacted far differently from one another when interpreting such issues as immigration reform, educational reform and police shootings.

I believe that the gospel is so powerful that it is possible for diverse Christians to come together with one voice and prophetically interpret, speak and bring solutions to these painful and controversial issues.

God is not colorblind since He made humans black, brown, yellow, red and white in His image. He designed us to have distinctions in culture regarding food, dress, language and other things based upon ethnic nuances. However, these distinctions are not where believers should derive their primary identity or anchor their biblical ethics. In Christ, there is neither male nor female, black, white or brown, for we are all one in Christ (Gal. 3:28). When our ethnic thinking trumps our biblical thinking, we are guilty either of ignorance or ethnic idolatry. Unless the body of Christ gets over its idolatry according to ethnicity, we will never become the generation that can disciple the nations (which refers to ethnic people groups, as shown in Matthew 28:19).

Since there is no neutrality, either the church will disciple the nations, or the nations will disciple the church. {eo}

Dr. Joseph Mattera is an internationally known author, consultant and theologian whose mission is to influence leaders who influence culture. He is the founding pastor of Resurrection Church and leads several organizations, including The U.S. Coalition of Apostolic Leaders and Christ Covenant Coalition. Dr. Mattera is the author of 12 bestselling books, including his latest *The Jesus Principles*, and is renowned for applying Scripture to contemporary culture. To order his books or to join the many thousands who subscribe to his newsletter go to .

Purchase **Joseph Mattera's** latest book, *The Jesus Principles*,

available now on Amazon here.