

5 Signs There's Idolatry in Your Church

The greatest sin in the Bible by far is the sin of idolatry. Idolatry is the main reason why God rebuked and judged the nation of Israel. (Read the major and minor prophets as well as the books of Kings and Chronicles.) Idolatry is when we violate the first of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:3), which says, "You shall have no other gods before Me." It is when we put something or someone first in our life, before the living and true God. Idolatry is the root cause of all other sins—which is why the first two commandments dealt with this. While the church today is focusing on various sins related to human sexuality and lifestyle choices—many in the church who may not fit into these two categories may be deluded into believing they are OK even though they may be breaking the greatest commandment.

The following are five signs of idolatry in the church based on my perspective of serving as a lead pastor for 30 years as well as extensive extra-local apostolic ministry to churches.

1) The idol of celebrity preachers: There are believers who run all over the country attending conferences of well-known preachers. Often, when they meet them in person, they fawn all over them and almost faint. Some well-known ministers cannot even go out in public without constantly getting stopped by admirers so they can take "selfies" with them. (Since I know and have worked with many of them, I have seen this first hand.) Although I am a proponent of having a culture of honor and respect for those leaders who labor among us (Heb. 13:7, 17), some people have stepped over the edge into idolatry. They follow everything they say without question and irrespective of scandal, and they do not search the Scriptures themselves to see if what is preached aligns with God's Word. When Cornelius met the apostle Peter and bowed down before

him, Peter rightly told him to get up, that he was only a man like himself (Acts 10). There is nothing wrong with emulating or following a leader, but there is something wrong with idolizing a Christian leader. There is such a pervasive “celebrity preacher” culture in the body of Christ today that some huge churches and enterprises have literally closed down 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 edify and minister to one another in love, then we would not depend merely upon one leader for the congregation to function (Eph. 4:16; 1 Cor. 12).

2) The idol of worship/entertainment: There are many believers who flock to churches that have skilled singers and music primarily to get entertained. Consequently, many of the believers don’t realize that they are putting self-gratification and entertainment before true worship. Years ago, many churches would not even have musical instruments and people would flock to churches anyway—even though the congregation only used hymnals and sang a cappella for worship. Now, it is very common for pastors to budget a large amount of money to pay for professional singers and musicians in order to fill their church services with people. In my opinion, even though we are called to worship with excellence and skill—we have gone too far in the church and have mingled as a core value the entertainment culture of the world. At the end of the day, whether we have worship performed by professionals, use merely a CD or sing a cappella, congregations should worship and adore Him just the same—in spirit and truth—which is the only kind of worship God seeks (John 4:23-24). Those who leave their local church to attend another church with better “worship,” in my opinion, are often guilty of idolatry since they cannot worship God from their heart without being 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 (3 John 2), Jesus told us to seek first His Kingdom and righteousness for our material needs to be added to us (Matt. 6:33). Many attempt to use the benevolent character of God to live a myopic life in which Christianity orbits around the universe of self. God has given us power to get wealth so we can spread His covenant to the whole earth—not merely so we can live a life of ease. I believe that 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 felt there was enough of a distinction to separate them. Through the years I have seen many in the church preach and promote an “I,” “me” and “my” culture. That is to say, much of the preaching deals with self-actualization, fulfillment and therapy rather than sound, biblical theology calling believers to live a life of service.

Pastors have often fed into the cultural idolatry of the people in order to attract people into the church—something that displeases God (see Ezek. 44:10, 12). I have observed that there are too few “cross-carrying” disciples attending churches—but many use God when they need Him. 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 merely to feel good instead of being equipped to do good works (Eph. 2:10). Many come to “get a word” instead of coming to “give a word” of edification to somebody (Is. 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 deceived into believing that because they shouted, they have already obeyed. Consequently,

there are many believers who live no differently than their unbelieving neighbors, which is why megachurches do not always result in “megacultural” influence, 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, never having digested the meat of the Word (1 Cor. 3:1-3).

5) The idol of ethnicity: There are many believers who have allowed their ethnicity and culture to trump the Word of God. Jesus said culture is even stronger than the Word of God in some people’s lives (Mark 7:7-8). Consequently, people read the Scriptures through their Caucasian/Western, Afro-centric, Hispanic or Asian lenses. One of the most important things to do in regards to receiving the Word of God for personal transformation is to attempt to take ourselves out of our own skin and read the Bible through the eyes of the authors original intent—something only the Holy Spirit can accomplish. There is no such thing as a Western European Caucasian Bible or an Afro-centric Bible. We need to stop reading the Scriptures merely through our ethnic lens because the truth is that the Bible was written with a Hebraic mindset and it is foolish to think we can fully understand it with our contemporary ethnic mindset. Consequently, believers often act and react no different from non-believers in regards to things that happen in contemporary society. White, black and brown believers have generally reacted far different from one another when it comes to interpreting immigration reform and the tragedies of the Ferguson shooting and Eric Garner death. Truly, 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 into and bring solutions to these painful and controversial issues!

God is not color blind, since He made humans black, brown, yellow, red and white in His own image. Hence, 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, for 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 or until the body of Christ gets over its idolatry according to ethnicity, we will never become the generation that can disciple the nations (or in other words, 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!

Joseph Mattera *is overseeing bishop of Resurrection Church and Christ Covenant Coalition, in Brooklyn, New York.*