

Five American Myths of Successful Churches and Ministries

In my reading of the Word of God over the past 34 years I have noticed a keen difference between the biblical measure of success and the way many American churches seem to measure success.

Many of the ways American churches measures success are in fact direct violations of the teachings of Jesus in Matthew 23. In this passage Jesus speaks against people loving titles, celebrity status, and desiring prominent places in public events. Through the centuries theology and church practice have been greatly influenced by the surrounding cultures. The following are my opinions regarding five myths for success that have crept into the church from American culture.

MYTH #1: The Size of the Church Shows Success.

There are some churches in the USA that have grown by the thousands within the first few years of their existence. That may not seem odd in certain parts of the world where the **Spirit of the Lord** is blowing upon a nation for true revival and evangelism (for example, Brazil, Africa, Indonesia). Unfortunately, most of the time in America, churches that number in the thousands after only a year or two of existence usually have grown so large via “transfer growth” (people who are already saved jumping from one church to another).

This happens usually in two ways: either a celebrity church (a church with an already established worldwide name brand) with a lot of money plants a church, or a celebrity leader (well-known TV personality) with a large following and mailing list opens up a church. In some cases a church without a prior name brand explodes in growth because of their talented **worship**

team, great administrative ability, marketing schemes, or **charismatic preacher**, and happens to be planted in an area in the midst of many small congregations that don't offer the same level of excitement through its programs, marketing and presentation.

When churches grow like this I usually don't fault the pastors of **megachurches** unless they are specifically targeting a Christian audience in their marketing and even service times. For example, when they advertise on Christian media outlets or choose a time on Sunday to initially meet when most churches don't have church services, like 6 p.m.

Megachurch pastors can't be blamed for people leaving other churches if they have not been properly disciplined or rooted and grounded in the faith. However, at the same time I do not hold up these churches as models for church growth because they are not growing organically through converting the lost, and because most likely they are gathering an uncommitted crowd rather than a true church that has members relating to one another as a family of families. (There is also a lot of turnover in these kinds of megachurches, with a different crowd every year.)

In **megachurches** even much of the pastoral staff eventually gets hired from outside the church because many times they do not have the capacity to develop their own leaders fast enough to keep up with their rapid growth! This can perpetuate a cycle of having a hireling and/or a professional mentality among the key staff who are not committed to long-term tenure and to the community they presently serve.

Unfortunately many saints with low self-esteem or ego need to attend one of these "successful" churches because they feel it gives them status. This is a far cry from the early church that numbered in the thousands after the **Day of Pentecost** because of mass conversions and the contemporary **persecuted church** (for example, in Muslim nations) who often meet from

house-to-house, break bread, and covenant with one another as brothers and sisters, and are willing to risk their lives for the **gospel** by being baptized!

I am all for explosive church growth: the kind of church growth that involves mostly new converts rather than transfer growth.

I am not necessarily opposed to quick **megachurch** growth but neither am I enthralled by it or hold it up as a model for true **revival** or church expansion.

MYTH #2: The Amount of the Budget Shows Success.

Another way I have noticed people measure success in this nation is by the amount of money that comes in to support their programs. When I am in some leadership meetings, besides asking how many people attend church on Sunday, the other question that is sometimes asked is how big is the church's budget? (This is not a question asked by mature, broken leaders unless out of necessity in a counseling or mentoring situation.)

Money may or may not be a sign of God's blessing upon a congregation. Sometimes God will test a strong church with financial challenges and hardship while at the same time I have seen some questionable ministries raise millions of dollars! Furthermore, I have seen unbiblical manipulation utilized by leaders to gather much money by the use of gimmicks, marketing and false promises of God's blessings for those who give money in return for a trinket, holy handkerchief or holy water from the Jordan River! There are even **false prophets** who bring in large wads of cash because they give prophetic words on the phone for a certain fee!

Having large amounts of money may not always show God's blessing because it can also come through fleshly manipulation!

MYTH #3: The Celebrity Status of the Leader Shows Success.

There are many leaders presently on television and radio. Their celebrity status has meant that these ministers are a success in the eyes of the typical American believer. However, I know many incredible preachers, teachers and ministers who are not well known outside of their communities who shun the media spotlight because they want to focus all their time and energy on the territory and the people that God has called them to!

Just because someone is well known doesn't necessarily mean God's favor and blessings are upon them. Unfortunately we have seen too many celebrity leaders living double lives. This means they started off correctly and then fell into sin or they lifted themselves up by smart marketing and were never lifted up by God to begin with!

When we lift ourselves up we eventually fall; when God lifts us up He gives us the grace to deal with the spotlight without falling into pride because He only lifts us up into prominence when we are spiritually and emotionally mature enough to handle it. However, because of our inherent sin nature even mature leaders sometimes fall into sin because of pride or pressure. So we are all fragile and must always seek the Lord for long-lasting success!

MYTH #4: The Title of the Leader Shows Success.

In the past 30-plus years of full-time ministry I have seen many people who call themselves apostle, bishop, chaplain, or reverend who did not have the ministry, training, or the fruit to back it up. There are some people with small Sunday gatherings in their living rooms who print business cards and call themselves bishop or apostle in spite of having no oversight of other pastors, congregations or bona fide leaders!

The reason for this is because many believers equate success

with the status that comes with a title. This quick way of achieving status seduces those who come out of a background of low self-esteem who need to be called bishop, apostle, or pastor even though they have never been trained, developed and commissioned as such by a legitimate spiritual father.

In their desire to feel good about themselves they lay claim to titles they never earned or were called to, thus making a mockery of the faith and watering down these titles for many legitimate leaders who now shun these titles because so much overuse has cheapened their meaning!

MYTH #5: The Affluent Lifestyle of the Leader Shows Success.

Although I truly believe that God financially blesses and provides for believers when they seek first His kingdom (Matthew 6:33), I also believe that Christians should pursue a life of simplicity rather than extravagance, especially in this day of financial scandal and abuse!

There is an unspoken assumption in certain segments of the church today in which a minister is judged by the style and expense of the suits they wear and cars they drive. They will think nothing of spending several thousand dollars for a custom-fit suit because it is necessary to keep up the appearance of God's blessing and success.

Although I have no problem with leaders wearing nice designer suits or driving an expensive car, I believe it is wrong for a leader to feel pressured to go into debt to purchase suits or cars so they can "fit in" while at the same time they cannot adequately provide for their family and/or put undue stress on their church and ministry. Besides, driving fancy cars and wearing nice suits are not always signs of prosperity because sometimes even poor people pull up for church in a Mercedes wearing fancy suits even though they may be virtually homeless or live in a small basement apartment!

(I remember that in the early 1990s I was so embarrassed of

driving an old van around that when I went to certain pastors' meetings I would park the vehicle a few blocks away so no one saw what I was driving!)

Sometimes the more you attempt to flaunt your prosperity the more it is a sign of lack! Some of the richest people I know dress very casually with jeans, tennis shoes, and wear inexpensive watches!

Truly God has given us the power to get wealth (Deut. 8:13) not so we can flaunt it or have an appearance of wealth but for the sake of spreading His covenant on the earth. We need to go from a rights-centered, consumerist, narcissistic mindset of claiming God's blessing for ourselves to a stewardship-centered understanding of wealth, which is the biblical view. If we seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (His values for living) then He will provide for us anyway!

I have seen firsthand God's blessing in this way. As I have sown my tithes and offerings into the church and attempted to put first His kingdom God has always graciously given back to me much more than I ever needed! For example, I have never had to pay for watches or decent suits since I put my only watch in the offering 30 years ago because I had no money; they have always been given to me as gifts!

In this day of financial hardship and poverty it is more imperative than ever for ministers and leaders in His kingdom to pursue a lifestyle of simplicity wherein our measure of success in the kingdom is godliness with great contentment (1 Timothy 6:6) along with righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17).

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