

Watch Out for the Virus of Spiritual Pride

Does anyone remember Robert Tilton's Word of Faith World Outreach Center in Dallas? It was one of the biggest megachurches in the country back in the 1980s. Tilton broadcast his popular "Success-N-Life" seminars all over the country from the church, until he was exposed for financial fraud. Word of Faith's building was lost in foreclosure and it was later demolished.

The Cathedral of the Holy Spirit, a church founded by Earl Paulk Jr. in the Atlanta suburbs, met a similar fate. It had 10,000 members before a sex scandal wiped it off the map. And don't forget Bishop Carlton Pearson's 5,000-member Higher Dimensions Family Church in Tulsa. It's closed.

In my years of observing the ups and downs of our movement, I've noticed a common cause when big churches abruptly close. I call it the virus of spiritual pride. And I am concerned that this virus is back today. We would do well to protect ourselves from infection. If you see any of these attitudes in your church, you can be sure that spiritual pride is spreading like a disease:

"We do church better." I know of one church planting movement that believes their Sunday morning formula is the only one that works. Beware when church leaders start fantasizing that they alone are the catalyst for spiritual revival in the world. Success is great, but it can also cause your downfall. If you take credit for all the good things happening in your ministry, you are on the path to shutdown. You are not the Holy Spirit! Give God the credit He deserves and acknowledge that there are plenty of other churches that are reaching people for Jesus even though they use different methods.

“Our pastor is the best.” In Uganda, a prophet named Elvis Mbonye attracts 5,000 people weekly to his church. He sits on a golden throne and invites parishioners to approach the stage, bow to him and kiss his feet. You may say that could never happen in America. But I see the same kind of celebrity worship on display in some of today’s megachurches. Let’s beware. A church built on one man’s charisma, pulpit swagger or even supernatural gifts will eventually crumble. The best preachers don’t demand attention; rather, they are busy training their replacements so the anointing doesn’t stop with them.

“We have the ‘secret’ revelation.” It was spiritual pride that moved Joseph Smith to found the Mormon Church—because he claimed to have secret information about Jesus Christ that no other church had. Smith’s revelations proved to be bogus, but millions have been deceived by his doctrines. Spiritual pride leads people into deception. Members of the Colossian church began to have grandiose visions (see Col. 2:18), yet their hyper-spirituality created divisions in the church. Any prophecy or vision that suggests, “We have more of the truth than all other churches,” is not from God!

“We are the coolest Christians.” The spirit of pride creates an “us vs. them” mentality. The same devil who tempted Jesus in the wilderness whispers to us: “You are better than them. You have the anointing—they don’t. You have paid the price—they haven’t. You are the new wineskin—they are old and irrelevant.” This was the sin of the church in Ephesus. They had opposed false teachers and false apostles, yet Jesus rebuked them because they had lost their first love (see Rev. 2:4). Pride always distorts reality and makes you look better than others!

“God favors our group.” There are many wonderful church movements on the scene today. Some are highly visible on television and social media; others produce music that is hugely popular. Every one of these movements has an important

contribution to make—whether it's Hillsong, Bethel Church, Elevation, Gateway, Planet Shakers or ARC. We should be thankful for what God is doing in each of them.

At the same time, there are also many smaller, lesser known churches and movements that don't have the huge audiences, the big money, the media buzz or the "cool factor" that these groups have—yet God is also working through them. Never join a group because of the numbers or the cool factor. Don't jump on bandwagons just because everyone else is. Follow the Holy Spirit, not men.

Let God lead you to the church where He can most effectively use you. And wherever God plants you, stay humble and avoid the deadly virus of pride.