

A walk with Mr O (21)

The idol in our churches

Mr O, what is an idol?

You'll tell me in a moment what is behind your question. The answer, however, is simple. Whatever receives the attention which is due to God alone is an idol.

It's just that I've been reading 1 John and the apostle closes his letter by telling us to keep ourselves from idols. That has left me wondering what our modern idols might be.

That varies very much from person to person. But there is no doubt that there is one idol which has installed itself unnoticed in the vast majority of our churches. You see it almost everywhere. It is the idol of cultural relevance.

Cultural relevance? I don't think I really know what that is. What do you mean?

Well, every group of people has a culture. This is true of nations, regions, and societies in general. In this twenty-first century it is true of what we call 'The West'. A group's culture consists of the beliefs and values which are widely shared by the people of that group.

Thank you, Mr O. But perhaps you could also tell me what you mean by 'relevance'.

Something is relevant when it has some real importance or significance for people; when it has a bearing on their lives.

So what's wrong with cultural relevance, then?

There's nothing wrong with it unless it becomes our idol. And, sadly, that is exactly what is happening in so many of our churches.

Can you give me some examples?

Yes. Just look at the content of so much modern preaching. Sermon after sermon does the same thing. It consists largely of an examination of what our society believes and values, and then gives a biblical answer to it.

I'm sorry, Mr O. I can't see why that is a problem. How can we live for Christ in this modern world unless we know how this world ticks, and how God expects us to live differently in it?

The problem is that it is actually the world that is deciding what is being taught in our churches. Meanwhile there are vast tracts of truth which God wants us to know about which are entirely neglected. This is one of the reasons why so many modern Evangelicals have such poor Bible knowledge and are so doctrinally muddled.

In our police forces there are units which specialise in spotting counterfeit banknotes. How are those units trained? They spend almost all of their time in looking closely and repeatedly at genuine notes. In this way they learn to spot fakes instantly, even if they have never met that particular type before. Their training is focussed on getting a thorough knowledge of what is genuine, not of what is false. As I see it, this is how churches should behave.

What about some other examples of the idolatry of cultural relevance?

By giving undue attention to cultural relevance churches actually end up being more worldly than godly. 'The West' now takes it for granted that if people are meeting up, it must be for some sort of entertainment. If those people are going to be instructed about anything, it must be by using screens. If they are going to have a great time together, music must be prominent. And in the final analysis everything must be about 'me'. The real 'me' is what I feel myself to be; and I must be constantly reminded that I can be anything I want to be.

Yes, Mr O, I can see for myself that all those ideas have infiltrated our churches. Worship is expected to be user-friendly. Screens are everywhere. Music dominates. And people expect to feel good at the end.

And yet, as the Scriptures reveal, there is nothing so beautiful, so attractive, so thrilling and so terrifying as God. When everything is done to bring Him credit; when we hear His Word taught plainly and feelingly; when we carry home pictures in our own minds; when we sing simple harmonies; and when we catch new and soul-ravishing views of Jesus, we experience dimensions of eternal love, joy and peace of which the world knows nothing. 'As for God, his way is perfect' (Psalm 18:30).

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