

Leadership

Idol Pleasures

What we prize, we eventually resemble—in unintended ways.

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Charles Tilly has written a fascinating book called [Credit and Blame](#), about ... well, if you can't get it from the title, it's not my fault. Tilly, a Columbia professor of social sciences, says that humans have invented four ways of giving credit.

1. Tournaments: a process of competitive elimination that starts with many contestants but narrows the winners down to one or a few.
2. Honors: where members of a select group screen outsiders and select a chosen few for recognition.
3. Promotions: the achievement of a certain rank or advance based on some level of performance.
4. Networks: local tribes of people distinguish certain members in their midst who deserve social prizes.

What struck me was a paragraph he wrote about the world in which prizes most resemble tournaments. "Consider the world of novelists, poets, painters, dancers, runners, violinists, boxers, opera singers, fashion models, jazz musicians, and motion picture actors. Tournaments seduce. They offer spectacular rewards to a few highly visible winners, and stimulate excessive hopes among likely losers. They involve innumerable participants, part time or full time, at the lower ranks, but only a handful who receive recognition at the top."

I could not help but think about churches. And pastors. "... spectacular rewards to a few highly visible winners, and stimulate excessive hopes ..."

I could not help but wonder: are churches being turned more and more into a giant tournament? Are we creating a church culture where there is an unspoken expectation that success is being the celebrity pastor of a celebrity church, and everything else is failure?

I know that those of us who go into church work are to regard ourselves as servants, are to offer our lives as a gift. But I wonder, really—are we just after the same prizes that everyone else is after: recognition, success, power, having people admire us, being thought of as strong and competent, having people want to listen to us or be around us or consider us important?

"Tournaments seduce ..." I don't think many of us go into church work for those reasons, at least not consciously. But in a tournament-structured, prize-obsessed society, it is hard to create an alternative culture.

I was at a church last year in South Africa that, when it is not hosting worship services, is a venue for "American Idol." Except that, since it's in South Africa, they call it South African Idol.

You could say they stole it from us, except I think the show was being done in England before it was being done here. The Idol phenomenon runs pretty deep. I tried to think of something funny to say about the irony of a church hosting a competition to discover an idol, but it had been commented on by about the last 50 speakers at that church so it didn't go over particularly well.

Tim Keller, in his thoughtful book [Counterfeit Gods](#), notes that while we think of idols as bronze statues that people bow before, an idol is really anything that we allow to take the place of God; anything from which we seek that which only God can give. Some would-be idols are obvious: money, sex, success, pleasure, love, attractiveness, addictions, Bob's Big Boy Hot Fudge Cake.

Some are more subtle. A relationship, for instance. We call an obsession with having someone's approval co-dependency; the Bible's word for it is idolatry. A country can be an idol. A family can be an idol.

How about a church? Could a church be an idol? How ironic would that be: the very place designed to house the worship of God could end up being the site of idolatry, with the pastor the biggest idolator of all. I sometimes wonder, if we were honest about it, how close we are to creating American (Church) Idol.

So I've started using a little IQ test, to help me assess my Idolatry Quotient. You can pass it along to someone who needs it:

—Where does my sense of security come from—from God, or from how my church is doing?

—After a worship service, do I find myself grateful that God is God and feeling joyful that I get to live in his care? Or—if I'm honest—are my emotions dictated more by how many bodies were in the room?

—Do I spend more time thinking about God, or thinking about how to make my church/ministry do better?

—How do I feel when the prospect for more prizes in the church tournament—recognition, praise, reputation, applause—get taken away from me?

—Does my sense of identity flow more out of my relationship with God or out of my performance at church?

—How much do I sacrifice to know God better versus how much do I sacrifice for

my church to work better?

Maybe for people in my line of work, our idols don't have names like Baal, Zeus, or Molech; they have names that feature apostles (if you're an older mainliner), or geographical features like mountains or bodies of water (if you're a middle-aged non-denominational baby boomer), or slightly abstract and random metaphors (if you're under 40), but end in the word "... Church."

The good news, if by chance you feel depressed or guilty about any of this, is that on the other side of idolatry is always freedom. The toppling of idols—even respectable, admired, best-practice, fastest-growing idols—is always the road to liberation.

Lord, deliver us from our idols ...

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