

Palisades Community Bible Church

Online Sunday School

What Is Bad About Big?

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One of the fundamental survival instincts of humans is socialization. “Safety in numbers” they say. It’s a strategy that assures success, especially in extreme situations. During the westward expansion of this land large groups organized ‘wagon trains.’ Many resources and many people increased the chances of success. Those wagon trains passed by numerous signs of failure (bones, graves, etc.) of those who took the on the challenge in smaller numbers. Bigger was better.

There was psychologist studying the human instinct to socialize by having a person stand under a tree on a busy sidewalk and look up. If a passerby asked him why he was looking in the tree, the reply was; “There’s a snake in the tree.” The passerby would look, as well, and seeing no snake, just proceed on their way.

However, when TWO people were looking into the tree, claiming to see a snake, passersby would tend to believe there was a snake, even though they could not see it. By the time there were three people claiming there’s a snake, passersby would not only agree, some would tell others. Some of them became downright insistent, if anyone denied seeing the snake. So, a person who became convinced himself, he would evangelize the next person...as if agreement added legitimacy to his belief.

The conclusion was that humans have a survival instinct- tendency to socialize and coordinate around common causes. That’s not a bad thing, unless the one leading the cause is a nut, and other nuts follow along. (If you don’t know the story of Jim Jones and the “People’s Temple” look it up.)

Our nation’s founding fathers spent a good deal of effort convincing people that, if we wanted liberty from England, and any other nation, we must stand UNITED.

“United we stand, divided we fall. Let us not split into factions which must destroy that union upon which our existence hangs.” - Patrick Henry

Matthew, 12:25: And Jesus knew their thoughts, and said unto them, “Every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and every city or house divided against itself shall not stand.”

Another instinctive behavior of humans is “bigger is better.” You wouldn’t put your money in “Hank’s Bank,” would you? You’d rather have it in a really big, strong, powerful bank that could protect your money from disasters, right? But wait. That’s not such a success, is it? No matter the size of the bank, fiscal failures affect us all.

Ah, but with church – bigger really IS better, right? Just look at the mega churches around the country. The largest is Lakewood Church in Houston, Texas, with Joel Osteen as its pastor. The average weekly attendance is 43,500. The list of “mega-churches” in America features about 245 churches that average a minimum of 2,500 participants per week, but more than half exceed 10,000. Many of these churches have TV, radio and internet broadcasted ministries, they support missionaries and they report lots of community outreach programs.

This is a praise, to be sure. But, when was the last time you visited one? Oh, there’s not one around here? Well then, you might consider the Covenant Fellowship Church in Glenn Mills, PA with 4,000 members, or the Yuong Sang Presbyterian Church in Horsham, PA with 5,000 members.

Jesus WANTS His church to be social, to grow in number, to meet together, to support, teach and encourage one another. Is bigger better, though? Is ‘really big’ the objective?

Matthew 18:20 “...For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Hebrews 10:24-25 “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”

Acts 2:42 “And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

Colossians 3:16 “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.”

Can BIG become bad? Can the desire to socialize become “too big?” God seemed to have a problem with the concept. In Genesis 10, we find the genealogies of Noah’s descendants following the flood. With people rapidly repopulating the region....

Genesis 10:32 These are the clans of Noah’s sons, according to their lines of descent, within their nations. From these the nations spread out over the earth after the flood.

Genesis 11: 1 Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. 2 As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar (Babylonia) and settled there.

3 They said to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. **4** Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

5 But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. **6** The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language, they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. **7** Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”

8 So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. **9** That is why it was called Babel (Hebrew; confusion) —because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

So, keeping in mind that Jesus wants us unified, working together, encouraging one another, adding to our numbers....there is also an element of “too big.” God did not want the people to build a city and a tower so big that it became an IDOL. The majesty of the tower was their focus.

Grab this idea; it’s not the size of a church that matters to God, it’s the faithfulness of the people. If a church becomes an idol, it’s not a good thing. Let’s examine the characteristics of an IDOL and why God would thwart the effort in the Genesis passage:

Idols masquerade as good ideas

Idols are attractive to the senses. They start with good intentions, but the truth about them is hidden from their worshipers, so that the idol will not to be put to shame. Like witchcraft, the witch-doctor will never reveal, or let you know the secrets, lest it be shamed for what it is.

Isaiah 44:9: They that make a graven image are all of them vanity; and their delectable things shall not profit; and they are their own witnesses; they see not, nor know; that they may be ashamed.

Idols are immobile; usually carried

They neither move by themselves nor are they omnipresent. They may have to be carried because they are dead and immobile. Since you often carry them, move them from one place to another, they are a burden to you. They burden you, everyone around you, and even your animals.

Isaiah 46:1, 7: Bel bows down, Nebo stoops, their idols were upon the beasts, and upon the cattle: your carriages were heavy loaded; they are a burden to the weary beast. They bear

him upon the shoulder, they carry him, and set him in his place, and he stands from his place shall he not remove.

Along this line of thought, big establishments tend to draw people who do not want to leave! Look, again, at Gen 10: 9 “.....**From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.** Spreading the Gospel means taking it to where it is not.

Remember what happened to the Jews who became believers and stayed in Jerusalem? Saul of Tarsus began afflicting them; searching them out and throwing them in jail. As a result, they scattered and began planting churches over a large area. Had they stayed in the big city, that’s how far the Gospel would have traveled.

Idols do not give man benefit or satisfaction

If you have an idol, it never gives you satisfaction. You’ll always try to increase the idol or acquire more idols in pursuit of satisfaction. A good example is money. If money is an idol to you, you’ll never be satisfied with the amount you have.

Isaiah 44:9 ...the things they delight in do not profit.

Demons use idols

Through idols, demonic spirits operate. These spirits from Satan’s arsenal are passed from the idols to the worshiper. One who worships an idol is possessed by the demon of that idol thus it’s very difficult for him/her to detach from it.

Exodus 20: 1 And God spoke all these words: 2 “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. 3 “You shall have no other gods before me. 4 “You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. 5 You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, 6 but showing love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments.

God hates idols because they replace faith in Him with faith in lies

Idols have a way of taking over. Look at almost every King that Israel had; most started out with God’s hand of blessing upon them. Living in a palace, living with luxury, living with riches, many became proud, corrupt and sinful. Even Gideon, who had succeeded in battles under God’s blessings, created an idol. He took plundered gold from the last battle and made an “Ephod,” which is the most revered, ornament that the High Priest wears in the Temple. It was a symbol of God’s presence, but God does not want us worshipping things made by hands (see the Exodus 20 passage above).

Judges 8: 27 Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshipping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.

The manner God prescribed for the ephod was a part of the Priest's adornment when he shared the word of God in Temple. Going to the Temple, one follows the laws of sacrifice for sins, and hearing the word of God. Instead, the people went to Ophrah to see the ephod. Where was God's place in all this? You know what this is like? It's like Christians, today, staying home and watching a sermon on TV instead of going to Church and worshipping with fellow believers. (If you're sick, stay home. But, if you can go to the grocery store, you can come to church.)

Romans 12: 1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

God confused those involved in building the great tower in the great city because two things were going on. See Gen 11: 3, above. 1) They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. These are man-made. They were doing it without God. They were acting in their own strength. Look at what the leaders of Israel said in response to God's judgement on their unfaithfulness when God allowed their enemy to attack and destroy their city:

Isaiah 9:10 "The bricks have fallen down, but we will rebuild with dressed stone; the fig trees have been felled, but we will replace them with cedars."

Their man-made structures were torn down and God wanted repentance. Instead, they rebelled further by vowing to rebuild it better than before, using "dressed stones" (carved by hand) and by planting stronger trees (cedars, which bear no fruit). The fig tree, and its fruit is a symbol of God's blessings. The fallen fig is a symbol of His judgment, and they KNEW IT! Isaiah 9:10 is the leadership, in effect, saying "We don't need you, God."

Back to Gen 11: 3, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth." Just WHO were they were serving? It certainly was not God! This was a selfish, prideful, display of human strength over faith in God.

By now, I hope you're getting the idea that the only time 'Big is Bad' is when it becomes an IDOL. Only God knows the heart, but, I wonder how many people go to a church....ANY church....and treat it like an idol. Church attendance can become an idol, replacing true faith in God. The evidence of faith in God are a) trusting in Jesus, b) obedience to God's word and c) genuine love between His disciples.

Faith in the size of the church, faith in the building, faith in the wealth of the church, faith in its many good works....these all can serve to replace a person's faith in God. Even DOING

good things for God can become idolatrous. If a person feels justified in their good works, yet fails to trust Jesus for their standing before God, they are serving an idol that they, themselves, have created. Church attendance and activity do not save. Only Jesus does that.

Hosea 6: 6 “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

1 Samuel 15:22 “What is more pleasing to the LORD: your burnt offerings and sacrifices or your obedience to his voice? Listen! Obedience is better than sacrifice, and submission is better than offering the fat of rams.”

If you were an adult in the mid-90s, you may remember “Promise Keepers.” It was a movement of Christians that strove to build up men in their faith, in their walk with Christ and their testimonies in their homes. Large rallies were held in sports stadiums in many cities across the nation. I was in the packed stadium in DC when tens of thousands of men were asked to stand for prayer. The pastor asked us to take off our shoes. He cited Moses standing in the presence of God:

Exodus 3: 2 There the angel of the LORD appeared to him (Christophany) in a blazing fire from within a bush. Moses saw the bush ablaze with fire, but it was not consumed. 3 So Moses thought, “I must go over and see this marvelous sight. Why is the bush not burning up?” 4 When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called out to him from within the bush, “Moses, Moses!”

“Here I am,” he answered. 5 “Do not come any closer,” God said. “Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.” 6 Then He said, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.”

This pastor explained that God told Moses to remove his sandals because he was standing on “Holy Ground.” It was no ordinary ground...it was HOLY. Holy means; ‘dedicated or consecrated to God; sacred. God wanted nothing man-made between this consecrated place and His creation. God wanted all man-made objects out of the way.

Shoes enable us to walk more ably, more confidently, even pridefully. God said; “Take them off.”

Shoes help define us, show our importance, communicate our identity. God said; “Take them off.

Shoes protect us from nature, from stones, from thorns, from venomous creatures. God said; “Take them off.”

God was saying; This ground is consecrated for My purpose. It is ground that is dedicated for honoring Me. “Take them off. I am your God.”

Do you get the picture that God wants us connected to Him? Do you see that God does NOT want us reveling in the things of this world; money, fame, cars, travel, careers, education, etc.? God wants us to know Him...really KNOW Him. That's why He sent His Son for our souls.

God is not impressed by thousands of members in a congregation, He is impressed by those who have chosen to receive His Son and to obey His Word. God is not impressed by the beauty of the buildings, or the fine trappings inside; He's impressed when you serve Him with a pure heart. God is not impressed by the things this world says are honorable, he is impressed by those who hear His Word and obey it. Read carefully His words:

Malachi 3: 5 "So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me (respect me)," says the Lord Almighty.

6 "I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed (I have preserved you though you rebel against me). 7 Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the Lord Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?'

8 "Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?'

"In tithes and offerings. 9 You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. 11 I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe," says the Lord Almighty. 12 "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the Lord Almighty.

13 "You have spoken arrogantly against me," says the Lord. "Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?'

14 "You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? 15 But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly, evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it.'"

16 Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored his name.

17 "On the day when I act," says the Lord Almighty, "they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. 18 And

you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

God was communicating the faithless-ness of Israel; their selfish behaviors and their wicked hearts. They said; what's the point of serving God if evil people are carrying on and prospering? It's a common complaint of man; if the wicked world around us is having a ball, getting away with things, living the high life, why are we back here serving God in humility?

I'll tell you why; we are better than that! To think that way is pure PRIDE. Pride is stealing the honor due to Lord for ourselves.

Proverbs 8:13 "Pride and arrogance and the evil way and the perverted mouth, I hate."

Isaiah 2:11 "The proud look of man will be abased, and the loftiness of man will be humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day."

God's response is that He will prosper the faithful beyond measure.....the faithful! Obey God and the natural blessings He has stored up and waiting for you will come.

Luke 6: 38 Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

Can big become bad? Yes, if it becomes the focus and God is left out. Can strength be found in numbers? Yes, but without God, our works are in vain. Does the size of a church matter? Nope. The faithfulness of the people is what's important.

Throughout scripture, God continually demonstrates that He will make the weak strong, that he will keep those in peace who's minds are stayed on Him, that He will cause the increase.

When we, even with good intentions, step out in front of God, it is displeasing to Him. It is critical to be in His will by submitting things to Him in prayer and relying on the Holy Spirit and the scriptures for leadership.

The answer will never come in our own timing, and the blessings will always be in a way we do not expect. Count on it!