



8 Ways to Battle 'Comfort Idolatry'

Brett McCracken

One of Christianity's greatest idolatries today is also one of the most subtle and insidious: the idolatry of comfort.

Widespread especially in affluent Western contexts, comfort idolatry is the product of a consumerist context that frames everything—including spiritual things—in terms of expressive individualism, self-fulfillment, and “bettering yourself.” In this context, going to church is just one among many other curated things (which may also include podcasts, self-help books, juice cleanses, yoga, backpacking, the Enneagram, Jordan Peterson, and so forth) that can add something to one's unique spiritual path toward wisdom and wellness and becoming a “better person.”

Because it is so widespread and subtle, this framing doesn't often seem so deadly. But it turns Christianity into a product akin to a smartphone app: something the “user” can opt in or out of as is convenient, or appropriate as needed but only insofar as it suits them. If it is in any way uncomfortable or costly, the “app” is easily deleted.

But a Christianity that's accessed only as it suits us, only when it's comfortable and on our terms, is not really Christianity. To truly follow Jesus is to flip the cultural script on comfort. It is to shift one's gaze away from a consumer self and toward our worthy God; from an inward, self-help orientation to an outward, others-helping orientation. Healthy Christians are always wary of easing into comfortable Christianity.

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Last year I wrote about eight signs your Christianity might be too comfortable. If that's us, how can we address it? A good place to start is by recognizing, repenting, and praying for deliverance from this idolatrous temptation. Another foundational step is simply committing to a local church, recognizing that a healthy church should make us feel uncomfortable. But what else can we do? Here are eight additional ways a churchgoing Christian can proactively attack, or preventatively avoid, comfort idolatry in the Christian life.

1. Don't elevate your church preferences as the gold standard.

It's good to love your church. It's not good to idolize your church. Sometimes a healthy appreciation for one's church can turn into an unhealthy, insular orientation that excludes from fellowship (or even orthodoxy) other Christians and church traditions, just because they differ from how your congregation does things.

If you find it unbearable to sit through another church's service because "it's not how my church does it," that's a problem. The comfort of the familiar becomes idolatrous when anything unfamiliar is delegitimized. Christians and churches should challenge themselves to never assume they've arrived at the one, true, gold standard for how to do church.

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2. Learn from and partner beyond your 'tribe.'

Part of how Christians and churches can avoid the "we are the gold standard" temptation is by seeking to learn from believers outside their particular tribe. Maybe a white pastor could attend a Hispanic pastors' conference, or a Pentecostal church member could visit an Anglican church, or a 22-year-old could visit a church full of people in their 70s (or vice versa).

Maybe we could reach out to immigrant churches in our communities, serving them but also learning from them. Perhaps we could diversify the blogs and podcasts we take in, and push ourselves to listen more to voices that challenge us. Such things will help pop our insular bubbles and identify ways we have conflated cultural identity with Christian identity.

3. Don't evaluate church in terms of 'what I got out of it.'

A simple tactic for challenging consumer Christianity and comfort idolatry is to stop evaluating Sunday morning worship in terms of "what I got out of it." This tends to reduce the point of church to life-enhancement "takeaways" that only perpetuate the consumer approach. Instead, as you leave church on a Sunday, ask yourself, "How did I contribute? How did I edify the body of Christ?" Or ask questions that don't involve personal pronouns at all: "How was God glorified? What attributes of God were evident in the service?" Your assessment of a church should be God-centered, not me-centered.

4. Learn to worship God regardless of the music style.

Our strong opinions about worship-music styles present the greatest opportunities for us to challenge our comfort idolatry. Instead of folding your arms in protest and half-heartedly singing when you don't like the song or style of music, give yourself to worship even if you hate the music. Try it. It's liberating.

Pastors and worship leaders: help your congregations by constantly pushing them outside comfort zones. Avoid just one music style. For example, the “Hillsong sound” is great, but it is not the gold standard. Rotate worship bands and leaders who bring different styles. Sing old hymns, new praise choruses, gospel songs, spirituals. Spice it up for the sake of loosening the stiff grips people have on their beloved music preferences.

5. Arrive to church early and leave later, even if it means more awkward small talk.

As an introvert, I know how stressful and exhausting the pre- and post-church social mingling can be. I also know that when I arrive to church conveniently late and leave the service during the closing prayer, I’m placing my comfort above my spiritual vitality. The fact is, awkward social interactions in church can be a powerful antidote to comfort addiction. Nothing epitomizes the gloriously uncomfortable beauty of God’s family like the weird church people you rub shoulders with on any given Sunday—people with all sorts of backgrounds and personality quirks.

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When we arrive and leave church stealthily, we perpetuate a consumer spirituality that avoids the entanglements of community. When we never bother to make small talk, saints will remain acquaintances and strangers to you—not the brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, they could be to you.

6. Give to the point that you feel it in your budget.

Sacrificial giving is a great way to keep your comfort addiction in check. But the sacrificial part is important. It’s easy to give a portion of your paycheck in such a way that you never feel the pinch. It’s harder to be generous when your budget is tight and there seems to be no margin to give. Cultivating the habit of financial generosity, especially when it is costly to you, is one of the clearest ways you can place the kingdom of God above your personal comfort. Generosity for gospel advance is always worth it, even if it means we have to scale back our vacation plans, postpone our renovation project, or cut back our monthly latte quota.

7. Be flexible for the sake of mission.

Comfort idolatry often breeds rigidity in the Christian life—an unwillingness to adapt to change, a nostalgia for “how things were,” a hesitance to uproot when mission calls. A good way to respond to this tendency is to deliberately cultivate flexibility and nimbleness in the way you approach church. Don’t be so over-scheduled that you can’t have dinner with church newcomers on a whim. Don’t be so tied to your ministry niche that you aren’t willing to jump in and serve wherever there’s a need. Don’t be such a fan of talented church leaders that you don’t celebrate, albeit with sadness, when God calls them to lead a new campus or church plant. Be flexible and ready to move when mission and evangelistic opportunities arise. Be willing to sacrifice comfort and the familiar when the Spirit is at work and the gospel is advancing.

8. Don’t quit the minute it gets hard.

When comfort is a chief value in our spiritual life, it’s easy to justify leaving a church the minute it becomes uncomfortable. Perhaps something about the pastor annoys you. Perhaps you haven’t heard satisfactory answers about a particular theological stance. Maybe the community just doesn’t “get you.” Maybe you feel like your doubts, or passions, are too much for the church to handle.

Some of these may eventually become valid reasons to leave, but none of them should cause you to bail right away. Challenge yourself to stick around even when the honeymoon period wears off. Show up at church even when you don't feel like it. Do not neglect meeting together (Heb. 10:25). It's not about whether a church can handle your doubts and your angst. The fact is, God can handle it. And he wants you in a church family, working through the challenges and growing together with other members of the body.

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"I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."

—C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock*

Here, Lewis is hitting on one of the very significant mistakes that people make when it comes to religion in general and Christianity in particular. (He had a knack for that sort of thing.) Since the rise of theological liberalism in the 19th century, there has been an over-emphasis on the comforting aspects of the faith to the detriment of Christianity as a whole. This results in the idea of religion as a "crutch" to help us limp through a hard world we fear to face. That has been reinforced in recent years by the wave of affluence we've experienced in the western world since the end of World War II. Today, no one wants to accept a religion that has hard things to say about them or the way they live their lives.

Fortunately (or unfortunately, depending on your position), the Truth of Christianity is far harder than the world around us. It shows us things about ourselves that no one wants to admit—after all, a real relationship with Christ begins with a knowledge of our own sin and with the admission that "we're not all OK, myself least of all." That is precisely the converse of the message being broadcast by the modern world. In reality, religion—Christianity—is not simply an easy expedient adopted by the weak to protect themselves from harsh naturalism. It is the acceptance of the even harder path that leads the weak to become strong through Him.

Christianity isn't a warm, fuzzy blanket that we wrap ourselves in when we feel the cold of the universe. It is far more than a get-out-of-Hell-free card. It is the Universal Sovereign's attempt to set us back to rights after we have so thoroughly injured ourselves and His creation that He would be justified in simply doing away with it all. The Truth of Christianity restores us to proper balance with Himself and with His creation as a whole. That affects our entire life in different ways, some comforting, some hard, but all good.

Just try to balance all that on a simple crutch!