

How To Destroy a Church

September 11-12, 1999

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The Church and Relationships Series

1 Cor. 3:16-17

Someone sent me a joke last week that I thought was really funny. I don't know how long I will be able to keep this up.

But there were these two elderly women, Gladys and Emma, and they are driving down the road, both of them barely able to see over the dashboard. Emma is the passenger. They come to an intersection and Emma thinks the light has turned red, but Gladys drives the car right on through. She thinks her head and says to herself, "Boy that was close."

They come up to another intersection and Emma thinks they will stop because the light is red. But they whizzed through that intersection as well. Emma thinks to herself, "I must be going crazy. I distinctly thought that the light was red. Why aren't we stopping at these intersections?"

The third intersection...sees another red light...car drives right on through. Finally, Emma in terror turns to her friend Gladys and says, "Gladys, what are you doing? We've gone through three intersections that have had three red lights. How can you drive like that?"

Gladys looks at Emma and says, "Oh, I'm sorry...was I driving?"

The text we are going to be looking at this week is found in 1 Cor. 3:16-17, where we read:

"Don't you know that you, yourselves, are God's Temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's Temple, God will destroy him, for God's Temple is sacred and you are that Temple."

In a moment we will talk about what it means to be God's Temple. But let me remind you of something I said last week. If you weren't here, then you will be hearing this for the first time. When the apostle Paul speaks to us about being God's Temple in 1 Cor. 3, he is not talking about us as individuals. He is not saying when he later says in 1 Cor. 6, "Do you not know that your bodies are Temples of the Holy Spirit." There is a sense in which we, individually, carry with us the presence of God, if we are Christians, because the Bible says that the Holy Spirit comes to dwell inside of a person by virtue of the born again experience.

But Paul is not talking about each of us as individuals as being Temples of God in 1 Cor. 3. All of 1 Cor. 3 deals with us collectively as a church. He says, "The church together, the church corporately, is the Temple of God, God's dwelling place on earth." And then he goes on and says, "If anyone destroys this Temple, [which in this text is the Christian church] God will destroy him."

There is on occasion, something fun about being destructive. I don't know if you have ever had the opportunity to destroy a house or building. I did when I was a boy. One of the happiest days I ever had, as a ten-year-old was the day my friends and I got to destroy a house.

Before you ask, “Did the owner know?” Or some of you may shake your heads in disbelief disregarding what I am saying. Trust me, most boys can think of nothing more fun than pulling a house down.

In this particular case, my father was a homebuilder and before he was able to construct some new houses on a particular site, the existing house had to come down. And a few hours before the bulldozers came to pull the house down, my dad kindly let me and my friends go on a rampage through the house. We had axes and sledgehammers and were able to wreck walls, chop up staircases, and throw chairs through windows. Trust me, boys like this kind of thing. If you could have an amusement park ride that involved nothing other than destroying a house, boys would be lined up for miles. That is why boys like blowing stuff up. My friends and I were continually buying new kinds of fireworks to see what we could blow up and how high it would blow.

But on this occasion, we got to smash and pillage like some marauding band of Vikings. It was great fun.

Even adults occasionally like to see buildings destroyed. I remember watching the news some time ago where the Federal Government asked tenants of a large housing project in St. Louis, “What should be done with the housing project?” The housing project had been the result of one of those well-intentioned social work theorists who thought, “Let’s bulldoze down the old rickety single family dwellings of the poor in this particular neighborhood. And let’s put in its place a massive building that would be new and efficient.”

But the residents of this project hated it. They couldn’t open the windows in this government building. They were all sealed shut. And it was supposed to have air conditioning in the summer, but often it didn’t work. So it was stifling hot. It was crime infested because the government regulations did not permit drug pushers to be evicted. The elevators were almost always out of order, so residents had to walk up 16 flights of stairs. People were afraid of being mugged. The hallways were filled with graffiti.

The government came along into this uncontrolled environment and said to the residents: What do you want us to do?

And the law-abiding residents of that project virtually unanimously said, “Blow it up.”

I remember watching the news report in which all the residents were standing around this project where they had lived and when the dynamite charges went off and the building collapsed; a great cheer arose from the crowd. People were celebrating the destruction of this awful building project.

Now, in contrast to the times when destruction can be fun and celebrated, most of the destruction we are in touch with is profoundly tragic. In Matthew 24 Jesus predicts the destruction of the Jewish Temple, which took place in history about 40 years after Jesus’ death. We read in Matt. 24 that Jesus left the Temple and was walking away when his disciples came up to him to call his attention to the buildings. “Do you see all these things, he asked? I tell you the truth; not one stone here will be left on another. Every one will be thrown down.”

Josephus, who was a Jewish historian, wrote about the destruction of the Jewish Temple in his book called The War of the Jews. The destruction took

place in 70 AD. The Roman legions surrounded Jerusalem and the Roman General Titus gave orders that the battering rams should be brought and set over against the western edifice of the inner Temple. For before these were brought the firmest of all the other engines had battered the walls for six days together without ceasing, but had made no impression upon the Temple. But the vast largeness and strong connection of the stones were superior to that of the engine and to that of the other battering rams also.

So other Romans began to undermine the foundations of the northern gate. And after a world of pains removed the outer most stones, yet the gates still upheld by the inner stones stood unhurt.

The Temple was a huge stone building. Josephus writes, they began to scale over the walls with ladders and tied ropes around the stones and began pulling them down physically. Then on the anniversary of the date when the first temple built by Solomon was destroyed by the Babylonians, 650 years before, on the very day that the first temple was burnt to the ground, Titus ordered the burning of this rebuilt temple and every part of the temple was burnt and every stone was pulled down by ropes and pulleys. The city, itself, according to Josephus, having suffered such a long siege and horrible famine began to try to escape through the walls of Jerusalem. Nearly a million Jews died. The destruction of the temple and the murder of the Jews in that war against the Romans in 70 AD was the single most awful event in Jewish history until The Holocaust in the 1940's.

Destruction is not always fun. Sometimes it is an absolute horror. And nothing is more horrible than the destruction of a church. About 15 years before the Temple in Jerusalem was destroyed, the apostle Paul perhaps sees the storm clouds gathering over Jerusalem. He certainly had, as a permanent fixture of his Jewish mind, the destruction of Solomon's Temple under Nebuchadnezzar back in 586 BC, looking ahead to the prophesied destruction of the Jewish Temple in 70 AD, looking back to the destruction of the temple under the Babylonians in 586 BC, Paul uses these two grim days in Jewish history to underline to the Corinthians the awfulness of destroying a church. He writes:

"Don't you know that you, yourselves, are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is sacred and you are that temple."

The Bible tells us how God's temple is destroyed. That is the theme of my message today – how people can go about destroying the church, even a church that is this massive, this seemingly indestructible. Let's pray and ask God's presence.

Last week I began a series on the church and our relationships with each other. One of the things that concern me, especially as Vineyard Columbus continues to grow, is a mindset that is really dominant in America. That is the mindset of individualism. This concern about me, myself, my rights, and my needs takes precedent over all other things and all other relationships.

This mindset of individualism dominates most Christians' thinking about what God is doing in the world. There are very few Christians in America that have a proper view of the church and that God is interested in something other than you as an individual. But that he is interested in building a people who are highly

related to each other, who know how to forgive one another and show mercy to each other, and who are family together. He is interested in building a church.

And for most Americans the church exists, as everything else exists, for the purpose of serving the individual. You ask the average American Christian, "Why do you participate in church?" The answer is "Because it helps me individually to grow." And if a particular church doesn't help me to grow, well then I really don't need to have association with that church because the whole thing is about my growth and my individual progress and how I am doing.

There is virtually no understanding of our connection with each other, our responsibilities to each other, that God is interested in the growth of something beyond you or me.

Well, we will tackle those themes over the next few weeks. And I will attempt to chip away at some of the individualism that is surely part of many of our mindsets.

Last week we explored a few of the kaleidoscope of images that Paul uses regarding the church in 1 Cor. 3. And we saw that Paul suggests that the church can be understood, first of all, as God's field, God's growing place, secondly, as God's building, and third, which we will look at today, as God's temple. He says in verse 9, "You are God's field, God's building." And then in verse 16, "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you."

We saw last week that these three models, these images of the church, correspond to the three primary functions of the church. God's field tells us about the function of evangelism as the church reaches out to the world and grows numerically. God's building talks to us about the function of edification as the church grows up into maturity. And God's temple speaks to us about the function of worship.

God's field – an outreach to the world.

God's building – inreach to the church

God's temple – upreach to God

Don't you know that you are God's temple? What does that mean? That the church collectively is God's temple?

Well, we need to understand the function of the temple in the Old Testament and in the days up and coming until the day of Jesus Christ. The temple in the Old Testament was the dwelling place of the invisible God. The temple was called The House of God, The House of the Lord. Many people try to transfer that language of the temple to the building that houses the church. They will say, "We are building the house of God." But the physical building that we are in could never be called the house of God. On the other hand, the living relationships that we have with each other and with God – together we are the house of the Lord.

What was significant about the temple in the Old Testament was that there dwelt the presence of God. In the holy of holies, in the inner sanctuary of the temple, God set his name there, his presence there. And we read back in the book of 1 Kings that at the dedication of the temple, the presence of God was so overwhelming that a cloud filled the house of the Lord so that the priests could

not stand to minister because of the cloud. The glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.

The temple stands for the presence of God. If you are taking notes, you might want to jot down as a cross reference Ephesians 2:19-22 where the apostle Paul says, "You were no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the same center of God's household having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole building being fit together is growing into a holy temple to the Lord, in whom you will also be built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit."

The significant thing about God's temple is that God's temple contains the presence of God. Another way to think about God's temple is that God's temple is the intersecting point between heaven and earth. It is in God's temple that people meet with God.

Think about the functions of the Old Testament temple. It was in the temple that the priests gained the mind of God by casting lots. It was in the temple that the priests taught God's law. And it was in the temple that people offered prayer. The temple was the place of intersection between heaven and earth.

How do you find God in this universe? How do you communicate with God and have God communicate with you? Go to the temple. And we, the Christian church, are the temple. We are the meeting place of God with men. We are the intersecting point of heaven and earth. We are the place where God communicates to people and people communicate with God.

But as in the days of Nebuchadnezzar, as prophesied by Jesus regarding Herod's temple, this wonderful meeting place with God, this intersection point of heaven and earth, can be destroyed. The apostle Paul said, "If anyone destroys God's temple (verse 17), God will destroy him."

How can a church be destroyed?

First of all we can use shoddy materials in building the church. Paul writes in 1 Cor. 3:10, "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay a foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is because the day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss. He, himself, will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."

Paul was talking about the proper materials to build a church with. He says you can use right materials or shoddy materials. You can build with gold, silver or precious stone or with wood, hay and stubble – cheap substitutes, shoddy materials.

I mentioned before that my father was a builder. Some years ago he helped me construct a deck on the back of my home. My dad took me to the lumberyard where we selected boards that he was going to use to help build the deck. He looked over all the boards to see if they were straight and how many knotholes

they had, or if any of the boards had been eroded. He selected boards out that he wanted to use. And then the lumberyard was to deliver the lumber.

When the lumber came, the boards they were delivering were not the boards that my father selected. Some of the boards had cracks in them. Some had knotholes. There were pieces of wood missing at the end of the boards. I remember my dad picking up one of the boards and throwing it at the deliveryman, as only my dad can. And he said, "This wood is nothing but a pile of...not good wood. Shoddy materials.

When you build using shoddy materials, any stress can cause the destruction of the house. We had a tragic example of that in the recent earthquake in Turkey. It was discovered that the majority of deaths in that earthquake were the result of contractors using shoddy materials. One contractor recently confessed to using beach sand in his cement mixes.

I have often noted that reading about so-called natural disasters and people questioning God about why these disasters took place and why the massive loss of life, how often it is that the loss of life is multiplied by many times because of people's sin and greed and corruption. In Turkey the loss of life was probably a 100 fold, a 1000 fold worse than it otherwise would have been had not some greedy builders decided to construct homes with cheap materials.

When Paul says, "If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is" Paul was talking about the building of the Christian church and not the building of our own individual lives. But certainly, this notion of using cheap substitutes and shoddy materials absolutely has application to you as individuals and to your families, because families and individual lives are destroyed when folks use cheap substitutes, when they give no thought to the materials they are using to build a home or a life.

What do I mean by cheap substitutes that eventually cause lives and families to collapse, to be destroyed?

Well, certainly, for individuals a focus on your outward appearance. You can't walk by a magazine rack anymore without seeing some buffed up man showing off his 6-pack. Or some woman in the skimpiest of bikinis giving you tips on how to lose ten pounds or how to flatten your tummy. Cheap substitutes. A flat tummy and rock hard abs never saw anyone through a crisis involving the death of a parent or a divorce or a job loss or cancer or any of the hundred earthquakes that shake our foundations. They only symbolize an outward appearance, rather than the development of our characters and our relationships with Christ. Likewise, a career is a cheap substitute for a life or deep relationship with a spouse or one's kids.

It is interesting that when you look at the magazine racks, they never are called things like "Character" or "Integrity". There are never articles about how to keep your promises, even when it would be convenient to break them, or how to consume less and give more, or even how not to quit when the going gets tough.

Cheap substitutes exist all over the place in families where parents give their children things and dads feel that as long as they are handing their kids some money that is an adequate substitute for personal involvement in their children's

lives. Couples believe that a larger home is an adequate substitute for more time to communicate. People substitute their careers for childraising and being mothers and fathers. Parents substitute nannies and daycare workers when often, no always, they could give of themselves. In other words, parents substitute giving in, placating their children, for the hard work of discipline.

And, friends, there are lots of cheap substitutes in the church. It is possible to “build the church” with such shoddy materials and in the end we will have nothing to show for our efforts. People can flood into the church building and seek help, bring their friends, enjoy the warm atmosphere, have lots of counseling and self help and recovery groups and never have the real stuff of becoming devoted followers of Jesus Christ. When I think of cheap substitutes in building a church, I think of things like worship performance on Sunday morning where people sit and watch trained musicians perform rather than the real worship of God. I think of entertainment rather than an encounter with God’s mind and thoughts.

I think of the shoddy materials of lots of religious talk and hyper spirituality, rather than the real deal of having a changed life. Get the church involved with exciting programs that don’t deepen people. Multiply a bunch of superficial conversions. Raise money by any and all means, however manipulative and lacking in integrity. Keep everything light, positive and guilt-free. Remove the costs and the cross of Christianity. Tell people that when Jesus calls them, he doesn’t require that they die to self. That there is no self-denial at all required. And you build with shoddy materials.

Of course, the right materials are obvious. Right materials involve treating the Bible as if our lives depended upon it, not watering it down, not making the message more palatable for American consumers. The right materials have to do with spiritual reality, something substantive. The right materials are aiming at changed lives, not just spiritual talk, and real reconciliation between people. The right materials for building a church involve prayer. The right materials involve hard work and a genuine desire for people in the church to hear God’s mind before moving on. The real materials concern a concern for the truth, not just peace at any price. Not peace at the expense of truth, but peace based on a foundation of truth.

The apostle Paul says that there is a coming judgment on how we build. Verse 12, “If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stone – the right materials; or wood, hay or straw – shoddy materials; his work will be shown for what it is because the day will bring it to light. He is talking about the Day of Judgment. It will be revealed by fire and the fire will test the quality of each man’s work.

It is a sad thing, but the subject of judgment is almost entirely missing from Christian consciousness right now. The truth is people think infinitely more about their emotional health, how they feel, than what it will be like to stand before a holy God in judgment. This is true in the most conservative, evangelical church in America down to the most liberal church. It is absolutely the case that evangelicals across the board fear having a repressed psyche or an unsatisfying sex life much more than they fear standing before God in judgment. And it is the rarest of rare person who spends even a minute or two a day projecting

themselves forward to that time when we will stand before a holy God and have to give an account for our individual lives and also an account of how we built the church.

I read of a great Christian in the past that when asked what the secret was to his holiness said he spent 15 minutes a day contemplating judgment. If anything will straighten out the tangled lines in our lives and purify our corrupt motives and corrupt hearts, it is the contemplation of God's judgment on our lives. Jesus often appealed to judgment as strong medicine, as a bracing kind of slap in the face to break people out of spiritual slumber and out of our apathetic approach to God and the Christian life.

Here is a practical suggestion. Why don't you write this down? How about committing to not taking 15 minutes a day, but 5 minutes a day or even 2 minutes during your prayer time and contemplate God's judgment of your life. Take a few minutes in which you consider having to give an account. It is, shall we say, an awakening experience.

There are few people that see that present difficulties in their lives may be a sign of God's judgment now, His disciplining hand. We are, all of us, so used to being victims of our mothers and our fathers and our husbands and our wives. It is the rare person who sees their present difficulty as perhaps one of the merciful judgments of God to straighten them out before the great judgment day.

Have you ever said in a time of difficulty or trial, "This isn't the result of unfairness or injustice? And this isn't the result of me being victimized. But I created this situation and this is the consequence of my sin. Here is the discipline of God in my life."

Some years ago I met a young woman whose testimony I still find refreshing because she was pregnant out of wedlock and she was that rarest of rare people who looked me in the eye and said, "Rich, I have no one to blame but myself. I am not going to blame the father who walked away, or my dad who had a bunch of problems. I didn't have to get into bed. But now with God's help, I am going to deal with the consequences."

Paul says the day will reveal it when speaking of judgment. The Day of Judgment is a day of exposure where everything will be uncovered and all the human ways in which we cover up and pretend that things are better than they are and we are better than we are. All of our words, our manipulations, all of our spackling compound over the deep cracks in our lives and in the church will all be revealed. All the cheap substitutes that we have used in building our lives and the church will be revealed.

There is a wonderful picture of judgment found in our Arthur Miller's play, "Death of a Salesman." In the play the central figure is man named Willy Loman. Willy was a salesman, one of these backslapping, life of the party kind of guys. He thought the secret of success was knowing the right people and being liked by everyone. But before Willy died, everyone, his friends, his wife, his sons, even Willy himself, saw through his charade. He was just a big actor, a hollow shell, and a nice guy with nothing on the inside, just a schmoozer and a guy who learned how to work the ropes. When he saw himself as he really was, he couldn't take it. So he went out and committed suicide.

Fortunately, for us, when we see ourselves as we really are, schmoozers, greater talkers, great at working the angles – when we see that we can say, “Yes, God, that is what I am like. But I don’t want to be that person. I don’t want to be a hollow person. I want to be the real deal. Change me. Purify me and search me now so I don’t have to be searched and exposed later.”

A church is destroyed when it is built with the wrong materials and people forget judgment. A church is destroyed when we ignore serious problems. Certainly in the context of 1 Cor. 3 as Paul is speaking about destroying God’s temple, he is particularly speaking about factionalism and divisions in the church. He is talking about people who gossip about others. He is talking about people lining up behind various leaders. He is talking about self-promotion. Certainly, in the context of 1 Cor. 3, when Paul speaks about the person who would destroy the temple of God, he is talking about the divisive person, the person who separates people.

We know that there are a number of problems that can destroy a church. Heresy can. The Bible continually warns us against false teaching and deceptive kinds of words that can work their way into the church bringing destruction. Heresy can destroy a church.

Biblical illiteracy on the part of the mass of the church can destroy a church because the church doesn’t know what is true. And it can easily be led astray.

But I want to talk about what ultimately destroyed the temple back in the Old Testament. If you have a Bible, turn with me to Ezekiel 8. Ezekiel was a prophet during time of the Babylonian invasion. It was the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar who ultimately destroyed the first temple that was constructed by King Solomon.

What was the cause of the destruction of the temple? It wasn’t ultimately the Babylonians. What caused the destruction of the temple was the idolatry that was going on in the temple. Let’s read Ezekiel 8.

“In the sixth month of the sixth year of the fifth day when I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, the hand of the sovereign Lord came upon me. I looked and I saw a figure like that of a man from what it appeared to be his waist down. He was like fire from there up. His appearance was as bright as glowing metal.”

Ezekiel sees the same vision as he saw in Ezekiel 1 – a vision of the appearance of the likeness of God.

“He stretched outward what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up...”

There goes the idea that the Spirit of God is always a gentleman. Here God grabs him by the hair. Where does it say that in the Bible? Where does it say that God won’t shake you up? Who says God doesn’t have a right to toss us around like a rag doll. I like what Anne Dillard; the Christian author has to say. “Do people have any ideas who they are appealing to when they go to church in their crushed velvet hats? Instead of crushed velvet they put out issue people at church crash helmets.”

“The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem...”

Ezekiel at this time was in Babylon. But he has this vision of Jerusalem.

"To the entrance of the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood...

The idol that provokes to jealousy was probably Asherah, the idol of Asherah, and the mother goddess of the Cananites. King Manasseh in the past had put this fertility goddess, this statue in the temple. Later his son Josiah removed it. But it was probably put back up.

"In contrast to this idol, there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain. Then he said to me, 'Son of man, look toward the north.' I looked and in the entrance north of the gate of the altar I saw this idol of jealousy. And he said to me, 'Son of man, do you see what they are doing here—the utterly detestable things that the house of Israel is doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable.'"

Idols destroy God's temple. What do we mean by idols? Idols are what we use to substitute for God to replace what he can do in our lives. Idols are anything that we use or create out of this world when we refuse to turn to God for help, security, satisfaction and life. When instead of looking to the creator and having to deal with his lordship, we orient our lives toward the creation and make idols. Idols are what we exaggerate and inflate in importance in our lives that begin to replace the lordship of Christ.

G.K. Chesterton, the author, said that when we cease to worship God, we don't worship nothing, we worship, anything. We don't just eliminate God, we replace him. We put in our lives a bunch of substitutes.

Let me put it this way. What is the substitute in your life for God? Is it your work, your career? Work can be a God substitute giving us a sense of our meaning and purpose in life. It is something that we feel we can control and manage. An idol can be anything as small as a clean house.

An idol is something that replaces God. What do you look to in your life to provide you with life when you are bored other than God? What do you look to to dull the pain? Are you looking for life from sex? A life from drugs? A life from a new business conquest? A life from another ministry success? What do you look to to gain a sense of security? A clean house? More order in your life? What in your life are you really attached to? What in your life do you use as a replacement for your girlfriend or boyfriend? *Note to Editor...The following is some additional information Rich added (left margin of text). Please edit accordingly.*

Churches can be full of idols, too. The church can worship itself, it's own success, and it's own brilliance, including it's programs, its' reputation in the community, it's pastor, it's theology, or it's history. In many churches therapy and psychological concepts have replaced God. The language of therapy replaces biblical language. Becoming whole has replaced becoming holy. The idol of psychology is in the temple.

And then an idol is something that reduces God. Ezekiel 8 goes on to say this:

“Then he brought me to the entrance to the court. I looked, and I saw a hole in the wall. He said to me, ‘Son of man dig into the wall.’ So I dug into the wall and saw a doorway there. And he said to me, ‘Go in and see the wicked and detestable things they are doing here.’ So I went in and looked and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel. In front of them stood seventy elders of the house of Israel, and Jaazaniah son of Shaphan was standing among them. Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising. He said, ‘Son of man, have you see what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, ‘The Lord does not see us; the Lord has forsaken the land.’ Again, he said, ‘You will see them doing things that are even more detestable.’”

The Lord does not see us. Idols are a function of reducing God. There is a recent book out that is called The Trivialization of God by Donald McCullough that I was reading this week is true that idols are substitutes for God.

But it is also true, as this author points out, that idols are ways that we reduce God down to a manageable size. **Theology is important. We need ways of organizing and contemplating the truth found in this book. But God is bigger than any theology of any denomination.** In the American church we reduce God by making him the God of my cause. Among many conservative Christians people have gotten really confused about the difference between serving God by working for a just cause and serving a just cause by using God.

Abe Lincoln, during the Civil War, was once asked is God on the side of the Union? Lincoln said, “I haven’t any clue whether God is on the side of the Union, but my prayer is that the Union would be on the side of God.”

We reduce God down when he becomes the God of my style. People come to the Columbus Vineyard and occasionally I will hear comments that say, “Your worship style is different than my church background.” Sometimes, they will elaborate and say, “I am used to a much more exciting kind of worship style, more celebration.” Or “I am used to a more liturgical style or traditional style.”

Do you understand that we reduce God down when we say that we can’t find God apart from a certain style? When God becomes the God of our style of worship? He is just an idol. He is not the true and awesome God, the one who goes beyond any kind of worship form or hymn singing or pipe organ. We all have our preferences. We all have our subjective tastes. But you aren’t worshipping God when you are wrapped up in the style of things.

Sometimes God is reduced down when he becomes the God of my comfort. It is often the case that for Christians God is really there to make life a little easier for us, a little more comfortable, and a little more secure. It’s kind of like a shock absorber. But is that the awesome God of the Bible? Is the God of the Bible simply the God of my comfort? Are we worshipping the true God or some idol when all we are looking to God for is to make life easier for me?

Where is the God of Daniel’s friends when they were thrown into the fiery furnace said, “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire. And he will deliver us from your hand, O King. But even if he does

not, let it be known to you that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image you set up.”

Where is the God of Job who said, “Though you kill me, I am going to trust in you.”?

Where is the God of our Lord Jesus Christ in contemporary America who required Christ to choose against his own interests, who often has us make choices that in the short term requires us to die to what we want. The God of the Bible is not simply the God of our comfort, if by comfort we mean our immediate comfort.

He is not simply the God of our happiness, if by happiness we mean our immediate happiness. The church is destroyed by the reduced God instead of the great and an awesome God of the Bible who bids us to come to him and to die to ourselves.

Is God there merely to help us? Is God not also there to be obeyed and bowed down to? Or is our God simply there to help us or as a shock absorber? Then he is an idol and the church will be destroyed for worshipping such an idol.

A psychologist named Kim Hall said once “People walk into my office and say they are Christians. But I see no difference between Christians and non Christians in my counseling practices, except that in addition to wanting to be happy like the rest of the world, Christians expect God to make them happy and are depressed when he doesn’t.”

The God of my particular brand of theology, the God of my cause, the God of my style, the God of my comfort, the God of my happiness – these reductions of God are idols in the church and the worship of idols destroys the temple of God. But the worship of the true God, the God who says, “Put away your little agendas and your little requirements regarding how your life should go, come and follow me. Serve me. Obey me. Worship me. Give yourself fully to me. Get rid of your secret sins and your replacements for me.”

Ah, then, the temple of God becomes beautiful and grows. It becomes what it ought to be—the intersecting point between heaven and earth, the place where people encounter the presence of God.

Let’s pray.