

HOW TO DESTROY A CHURCH

by Ray C. Stedman

One of the most popular hymns of all time about the church is the well known *Onward, Christian Soldiers, Marching As To War*. The second verse is a great description, biblically, of the church:

Like a might army moves the church of God.
Brothers, we are treading where the saints have trod.
We are not divided; all one body we,
One in hope and doctrine, one in charity.

I think that captures in a wonderful way the teaching of the Scriptures about the church. But when you come to the actual experience of the church, it is sometimes not quite as exciting. It certainly was not at Corinth -- there was a church that had problems; they were very much divided.

Somebody has given us a parody of that second verse of *Onward, Christian Soldiers*:

Like a mighty turtle moves the church of God.
Brothers, we are treading where we've always trod.
We are much divided, many bodies we,
Strong in faith and doctrine, weak in charity.

That verse may describe the church -- at least the one we know -- more accurately than the other one. It surely describes the church at Corinth. Here was a church that had superb possibilities lying unrealized because of divisions, boastings, jealousies and carnal ambitions. As the Apostle Paul writes to the Corinthians, he sees behind all these symptoms to the root cause behind all things. I think it is very important that we understand this for the apostle takes us behind these superficial manifestations to the root problem.

What is it? It is the love of human wisdom, it is pride in the ability of man by his secular wisdom and knowledge of the day to solve the problems of life.

I think, without a doubt, that this is the major problem in the church in America today, this tendency to function like the world around does, bringing in the ideas, the attitudes and many of the systems of the world into the church. So instead of the church challenging the world, it is the world that makes its impact upon the church. That was the problem here at Corinth.

To counteract this, Paul calls us back to a true view of the church. In last week's passage we saw that God views the church as a great building that has a foundation that Paul and other apostles laid in the 1st century in giving us their apostolic witness to Jesus Christ. He is the foundation. The Scriptures, which the apostles gave us, tell us about Jesus -- who he is, what he does, how he comes into our lives by means of the Spirit today, how he changes us, how he is ready to empower us. All that is the foundation upon which the church must be built.

Through the centuries many have been building on that foundation. The great leaders, teachers and theologians, some of the great churchmen of the past -- Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Wesley, George Whitfield -- a great host of names have built upon it so the church has risen through the centuries.

But, as we saw last week, there is a sense in which every one of us who is possessed of the Spirit of God builds upon this foundation. We all touch one another; we build into other's lives; we affect everyone by the way we live and the way we think, the apostle called our attention to that. How are you building on the foundation? What materials are you using? Is it the wood, the hay and the stubble of human wisdom, the love of status, the seeking for ambition and prestige by which the world is characterized? Is this what you are

building for and with? Or is it with the truth revealed in that secret and hidden mystery of God, truth about yourself, about humanity, and about history? Is that what you are building on? Is that what you are building with? That is the question.

Now, in doing this building, there is a danger involved, and that is the way the apostle picks this up again in Verse 16. He introduces it with a question:

Do you not know that you are God's temple and the God's Spirit dwells in you? If any one destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple you are. {1 Cor 3:16-17 RSV}

There is no doubt that Paul has the congregation at Corinth in mind when he says this. "You as a people," he says, "functioning out in the world, at your work, wherever you are -- you are the temple of God." And, in a sense, this applies to every individual. In Chapter 6 Paul is going to say so very bluntly and plainly. He says, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?" {1 Cor 6:19a RSV}.

A few weeks ago I was in Chattanooga, Tennessee, at the Fellowship of Christian Airline Personnel Conference and a number of the pilots and flight attendants were sharing with us some of their experiences as Christian personnel in the airlines. One very beautiful stewardess told that one day she was serving coffee on a plane that had just taken off. As she came down the aisle, she stopped beside a man who looked up at her and got her attention. He then opened his hand and showed her an explicitly sexual object and she immediately got the implication. It shook her, and she did not know what to do for a moment. She turned, and went to the back of the plane to recover herself, and she prayed and asked God to show her what to do because she had to go up to that man again. She went back and knelt beside his seat and she looked him right in the eye and said, "Sir, I saw what you showed me and I understand what you mean, but there is something you need to know. I am a Christian, and my body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and God says he is going to destroy anyone who damages his temple." The man began to stammer out an apology, and she said, "I understand. Don't say any more. I just want you to know that." Later she gave grateful thanks that the Lord had laid that verse on her heart because it served to deliver her from both the embarrassment and the threat of that situation.

Now that is a great truth and one which the apostle will really underscore throughout this letter. This truth lies at the base of all that Christians do. Their bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, and when Christians, with the Spirit indwelling them, gather (as we are doing here this morning), the whole congregation becomes a great temple of the Holy Spirit, the center of the presence of God. The center of divine activity in this whole community is right here this morning because God the Spirit is present when his people are gathered together. "Where two or three are gathered together there am I in the midst of them" {Mat 18:20 KJV}, Jesus said.

But, according to this verse, it is possible to "destroy" the temple of God. (The word is really not "destroy." We usually think that word means "to eliminate or break apart." But the word is everywhere else translated in the Scriptures "corrupt." It means to damage, to injure, to harm the temple of God.) Nothing can destroy that temple. Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," {Matt 16:18 KJV}. No matter what force is brought against the church, how powerful may be its adversaries, nothing can destroy the temple of God in that sense. But it can be damaged, it can be injured, and that is what Paul is talking about here. He says it is a dangerous thing to destroy or corrupt the temple (the church of God), and God takes a very dim view of anyone who does so, and he will do something about it.

We have a very dramatic example of that in the fifth chapter of Acts, where Ananias and Sapphira indulged in a little personal hypocrisy. They pretended to a level of dedication and commitment which they really did not fulfill, and when they came before Peter by the insight of the Spirit he pronounced them guilty, and instantly they both fell dead at Peter's feet. That was not intended to be a model of what the Spirit is going to do every time there is hypocrisy in the church because he has never done it since. But It is intended to be a message from God as to what happens spiritually in a church when hypocrisy is allowed to pervade the thinking of the congregation. Something dies; something is damaged; some injury occurs, and God takes it very seriously.

Well, how do you damage the church? How do you corrupt the congregation? I think the answer is clear from

the context -- we have been looking at this all along. Corruption takes place when someone introduces the wisdom of the world into the life style and the practice of a congregation. If someone individually chooses to begin to live according to the wisdom and the practice of the world, he begins to corrupt and damage the church. He is building with shoddy material, with wood, hay and stubble which will not stand the test of the fire and therefore he is marring the building of the church. When someone seeks to make the church impressive and powerful by the methods and the standards of the world, he is fulfilling this very thing -- corrupting and damaging the church. So whoever suggests a compromise with the spirit of the age is fulfilling this dangerous thing, especially when he does so at the expense of the teachings of our Lord himself.

Let me give you some practical examples of this. (I think we need to make this practical and see what is happening in our own day, because it is what was happening in this 1st century world as well.) For one thing the church is damaged this way when within the congregation people begin to treat each other in the same way that they treat one another out in the world -- by recognizing distinctions between colors and classes and carrying these over into the life of the church.

Here in this country we have gone through a tremendous civil rights struggle in which it became evident that the churches, not only of the South but in many other parts of the country as well, had failed to believe the Word of God about those brothers and sisters in Christ who had a different color skin. They treated them in the same way the world around was treating them -- making distinctions and putting them down at a lower level of life. This damaged and injured the whole church because the church is at the very center of life and the world around reflects, to a great degree, the condition of the church. It produced that explosive situation in which our nation was torn apart because the church allowed a worldly philosophy to come in and govern the conduct and behavior of Christians.

This happens when a church insists on having a hierarchy in the government of a congregation -- someone at the top, someone in authority over everyone else. This is wrong, as our Lord said. "Among the Gentiles they are in authority over one another, but it shall not be so among you," he said {cf, Matt 20:25-26}. Yet how widely that has been ignored and how many churches still today have brought in the hierarchical structure of the world's government into the church. As a result the church is severely damaged by it.

This happens when a church permits the lax moral standards of the world to go unjudged within the congregation. (Paul is going to deal more with this as he comes into the next chapters.) It is happening all around us today. Sexual practices widely tolerated in the world are admitted into the church and Christians allow themselves to practice these kinds of things. This damages the church and tears it apart; it destroys and mars what God is doing.

This happens when you substitute secular insights and secular authority for guidance in the matter of counseling and discipline problems in a church. This is happening widely in our day. Much of secular counseling is designed to build up the flesh, to make people self-confident. This whole business of Transactional Analysis and Transcendental Meditation is based on the secular view of life, and the church forgets that the secular viewpoint is narrow and limited. It does not take in the whole factor of human life and make-up as God has made man to be. Apart from that understanding, operating only on that very narrow, limited viewpoint, severe damage is done to people in counseling. Although there may be momentary or temporary help, they are locked into a plateau from which they cannot emerge, and this is a way of damaging the church.

I think one widespread way of damaging the church today is to allow a congregation to drift into a "mechanical" worship. Perhaps nothing is more deadly than to permit people a kind of outward compliance with the matters of worship and service without any inward, heartfelt commitment to it. That will destroy a church.

When Paul wrote to the church at Colossae he saw them severely threatened by three things that were coming into the Church in their worship together:

1. One was formalism. They were going through ceremonies and rituals in a set way as though that was what God was after and not the change of heart that these things represented. That formalistic pattern

of worship is a destructive thing to the life of the church that God is seeking to build.

2. The second thing was emotionalism. Many of the Colossians were caught up in a kind of a mystical experience. They were talking about these things and they had forsaken, therefore, clinging to the Head of the body, which is Jesus himself. That was destroying the church, as it does in many places today.
3. And the third thing was an asceticism, a legalistic spirit that was taking pride in its dedicated heart and its willingness to give up so many things, to go in for fasting and beating the body, and not touching certain things. They were glorying in that fact. The apostle saw the church being threatened, choked and sabotaged by these kinds of practices.

Now, according to Paul, God takes this very seriously, and he does something about it. What does he do? Well, Paul says, "If any one destroys, or corrupts, God's temple, God will corrupt him."

What does he mean? I think it is set forth in Verse 15 which we read last week: "If any man's work is burned up, he will suffer loss," {1 Cor 3:15 RSV}. I tried to point out then that what happens is: We come to an awareness that all the effort we have been putting out to impress people with our godliness, our piety, our abilities, etc., come to nothing. They are a waste of time.

I was in Australia a couple of years ago preaching in a downtown Melbourne church -- a building that was rightly known all through the city for its beauty. I was staying in the home of one of the leading lay members of the congregation, a man who had devoted himself to this denomination in which I was ministering and who was known all through Australia as a leading churchman. He had given himself to many of the programs that the denomination had sponsored and he was leaned upon heavily as a leader in this field. He was also a very intelligent man, and, I think, a very deeply devoted man at heart.

I preached that night on Paul's experience of discovering how all his zealous effort on behalf of God was set aside in the early part of his ministry. How painfully he had to come to learn that all these things he counted upon from his past -- his dedication, his ancestry, his morality, his background as a Hebrew of the Hebrews, etc., all were set aside. He had to come at last to learn that the only thing that counts is what Christ was ready to do through him, as he puts it in Second Corinthians, "Nothing coming from me, everything coming from God," {cf, 2 Cor 3:5}.

As he was driving me home afterward this man turned to me and said, "You know, if what you said tonight is true, and I think it is, I have wasted my whole life." I do not think that was true because I knew his heart already, and I knew that there were things there that God had used him in greatly. But he caught, perhaps for the first time, a glimpse of the fact that effort put out to impress people of what the church is like and its power and impressiveness in the eyes of the world is wasted effort -- wood, hay and stubble that comes to nothing in the measurements of God.

Paul now moves on to the logical answer to this in Verse 18. What are you going to do? What is God's demand upon you if this is the danger under which we live? Well, Paul says,

Let no one deceive himself. If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly [foolishness] with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their craftiness," and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile," So let no one boast of men. {1 Cor 3:18-21a RSV}

There are two things Paul says to do if you catch yourself in this sort of a thing -- and we all do from time to time. We all think we are making an impression for God, doing great things for God, and down at the heart, hidden to others around us, is an ambition, a desire for prominence, for recognition, for fame perhaps.

Paul says, "Stop kidding yourself. Don't let anyone deceive himself in this. You may be greatly impressing men, but God is totally unimpressed. You may think you are a great success but God is sadly shaking his head

over what he sees. God cannot be fooled. He knows the heart. Others may give you tremendous applause and recognition, but if it is not coming from that sense of dependence on the wisdom and the power and the working of the Spirit of God, it all is wasted effort, coming to nothing."

And then, secondly, Paul says, "Deliberately choose what the world says is foolish. If any one among you thinks that he is wise in this age, thinks he's got it made, thinks he understands the methods to move people and motivate them, let him become a fool that he may become wise, "for the wisdom of the world is foolishness to God."

I was in the state of Washington a few weeks ago, and I met a pastor there who had been down here with us at PBC and he had set up some of the Body Life practices in his church. He told me that another pastor in town asked him once, "What are you doing over there in the church?" So he told him, "We're trying to share one another's problems. We pray for one another and we're trying to meet each other's needs. We have a service where we try to talk openly and honestly about where we are messing up in our homes and marriages." The other pastor said, "There's no other church in town that will act like that. Why do you do that?" And the first pastor said, "Because the New Testament tells us so." The other man said, "You won't get anywhere with that approach." But the first pastor said, "I determined that I was going to keep right on whether I got anywhere or not, because that is what God said to do."

Now that is becoming a fool in order that you might become wise. That is choosing what the world and the worldly church says is wrong, but because the Lord says it is right, being willing to act upon it.

I think of that word in Hebrews 11 about Moses growing up in Pharaoh's court. There came a day when it says, "He counted the reproach of Christ greater riches than all the treasures of Egypt," {cf, Heb 11:26 KJV}. There was a moment when he renounced the world and its allurements that he might suffer loss with the people of God for a season. How richly he won because of that.

I will never forget in my own life, as a young Christian many years ago, hearing George Beverly Shea sing the words for which he became famous. They spoke volumes to my own heart along this line.

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold.
I'd rather have him than have riches untold.
I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands.
I'd rather be led by his nail pierced hands
Than to be a king of a vast domain
And be held in sin's dread sway.
I'd rather have Jesus than anything this world affords today.

That is what Paul is talking about. Never mind what the world thinks, never mind what the world says, for the wisdom of the world will prove to be foolish in the end.

Are they not remarkable, the foolish things worldly people and worldly Christians will do in order to keep up with the styles, even? Did you read this week about what is the latest style in men's matters? Do you know what they have now to keep up with the fashion? Chest wigs! If you do not have hair on your chest, you can buy a wig for it. The style today is open shirts with hair visible and some men will not open their shirts because they do not have hair on their chests. Well, you can remedy that. You can buy a chest wig and nobody will know the difference. It will stay on even when you are swimming, they advertise. Nobody will laugh at you again. Isn't that wonderful?

How ridiculous, how foolish are the ways of the world. That is what Paul is saying. "The wisdom of this world is folly with God," he says. Quoting from Job he says, "God catches the wise in their craftiness," {cf, Job 5:13}. And then from Psalm 94, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile," {cf, Psa 94:11}. The word, really, is a breath, a puff of air. The words of the wise in the world are like a breath of air, a puff -- it is gone, instantly; it changes to something else. Those who give way to that not only damage the church, but they give way to that which in the end proves to be a wasted life.

Now contrasting that, Paul moves on to show you what happens when you choose the wisdom of God and the ways of God. He says,

For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's; and Christ is God's.
{1 Cor 21b-23 RSV}

You end up gaining the whole world. That is what Jesus said -- "The meek shall inherit the earth," {cf, Matt 5:5}. What a great and broad vista opens up to us in these words! After all, the trouble with the world is, if the world, or the worldly church, is offering you something, and you want it badly enough -- its fame, pleasure, honor, wealth, whatever it is -- you will probably get it. But that is all you will get.

Jesus said that if you do your giving to be seen of men you have your reward {cf, Matt 6:5}. That is it. You will never get another one; nothing waiting for you beyond, no treasure laid up in heaven. If you do your praying to be heard of men so that you get a reputation for piety and godliness, well, you will get the reputation, but that is all you get. It is the world that is narrow; it is the world that is crabbed and withered and limited in its whole approach. But, as Paul reveals here, those who choose God never lose.

This is right in line with Jesus' great principle, "If you save your life you will lose it, but if you give up your life for my sake you will save it," {cf, Matt 16:25, Mark 8:35}. Paul looks all around and says, "He who lets God choose, ends up with everything. Why do you divide between Paul and Apollos and Cephas, and choose one among them? You can have them all," he says. "They are all yours. Paul, who planted, his whole ministry is yours. Apollos, the waterer, his ministry is yours; you can get the benefit of it. Cephas, the rock, whatever there is of value in his ministry is yours. In fact the whole world is open to you. Led of the Spirit of God, you can go anywhere you want and God will give you things that money cannot buy."

I have had this experience many times of enjoying things that millionaires own, but I get to use -- they do not. The world is yours. Life with all its possibilities is open before you. God can lead you into where the real living is. Even death with its threat is already mastered; it is already yours. When you come to it, it will minister to you -- not take from you. It will bring you into glory. The present, the future, all things are yours because you are Christ's, and Christ is God's and therefore everything he owns is yours. All things belong to you because you belong to the One to whom all things belong.

That is an incredible vista, isn't it? And yet those words are true. That is what God has in mind for his people. As we choose the life style we are going to have, do we have the faith and the courage to set aside the life style of the world around us, with all its demands for conformity, and walk with God? When we do, all that God possesses becomes ours. We become children of a heavenly Being who makes it all available to us.

Prayer

Lord, grant to us the grace to see and the faith to understand that these words are true and to have the courage to act upon them throughout this week. Teach us, Lord, that we do not have to have everything that everybody else around us has; that we do not have to live like they live; that their values are not our values; that we do not have to defend ourselves like they have to defend themselves; that we do not have to get even like they feel they have to get even; that we can love the unlovely and be kind to the selfish and we do not have to be like we once were ourselves and still are, Lord, when we give way to the spirit of the world about us. Thank you that we can be forgiven and restored and we can walk with you, Lord, into this opening vista of life, into this new experience that shines as a light, as a bright pathway unto the day. We ask you in Jesus' name, Amen.

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