

Gods of the 21st Century

God	Existential Dilemma	Worship Expression	Idol	Temple	Priest	Healing Gift of God
God of More	Meaninglessness Emptiness	Consumption Desire for wealth Technology	Things Dollar Computer toys	Mall Wall Street Silicon Valley	Vendors, advertisers VC, Stock Broker, IB Steve Jobs, Bill Gates	Purpose and meaning beyond the material Enough material goods
God of Image	Low self-esteem	Fitness Beauty Fashion Display of status	Body Body Body Status symbols e.g.. automobile	Gym Beauty parlor Mirror Parking lot	Personal trainer Beautician Fashion designer Admiring observer Dr. Oz	Re-creation in the Image of God
God of Success	Lack of ascriptive worth, loved for being, not for doing	The Game	Winning	Stadium Boardroom School House	Coach, manager CEO Teacher, professor	Grace Significance
God of Escape	Demands of world; pain and suffering; stress	Drugs and alcohol Vacation Entertainment Workaholism	Pill, bottle Travel, the trip Celebrity Productivity	Bar, party Resort Theater Office	The dealer Travel consultant Critics The boss	Peace that passes all understanding
God of Relationship	Loneliness	Pop psychology Romance Family	Self Other Child/parent	Reading chair Bedroom Home	Dr. Phil Dr. Ruth Dr. Spock	God's presence in community, koinonia

I Kings 18: 17-39

When Ahab saw Elijah, Ahab said to him, 'Is it you, you troubler of Israel?' He answered, 'I have not troubled Israel; but you have, and your father's house, because you have forsaken the commandments of the LORD and followed the Baals. Now therefore have all Israel assemble for me at Mount Carmel, with the four hundred and fifty prophets of Baal and the four hundred prophets of Asherah, who eat at Jezebel's table.'

So Ahab sent to all the Israelites, and assembled the prophets at Mount Carmel. Elijah then came near to all the people, and said, 'How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.' The people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, 'I, even I only, am left a prophet of the LORD; but Baal's prophets number four hundred and

fifty. Let two bulls be given to us; let them choose one bull for themselves, cut it in pieces, and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; the god who answers by fire is indeed God.' All the people answered, 'Well spoken!' Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, 'Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many; then call on the name of your god, but put no fire to it.' So they took the bull that was given them, prepared it, and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon, crying, 'O Baal, answer us!' But there was no voice, and no answer. They limped about the altar that they had made. At noon Elijah mocked them, saying, 'Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened.' Then they cried aloud and, as was their custom, they cut themselves with swords and lances until the blood gushed out over them. As midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice, no answer, and no response.

Then Elijah said to all the people, 'Come closer to me'; and all the people came closer to him. First he repaired the altar of the LORD that had been thrown down; Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the LORD came, saying, 'Israel shall be your name'; with the stones he built an altar in the name of the LORD. Then he made a trench around the altar, large enough to contain two measures of seed. Next he put the wood in order, cut the bull in pieces, and laid it on the wood. He said, 'Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt-offering and on the wood.' Then he said, 'Do it a second time'; and they did it a second time. Again he said, 'Do it a third time'; and they did it a third time, so that the water ran all round the altar, and filled the trench also with water.

At the time of the offering of the oblation, the prophet Elijah came near and said, 'O LORD, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your bidding. Answer me, O LORD, answer me, so that this people may know that you, O LORD, are God,

and that you have turned their hearts back. 'Then the fire of the LORD fell and consumed the burnt-offering, the wood, the stones, and the dust, and even licked up the water that was in the trench. When all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, 'The LORD indeed is God; the LORD indeed is God.'

Why were the Israelites interested in Baal and Asherah? The answer is really quite simple. They were interested, because Baal and Asherah were gods of fertility, fruitfulness, and productivity. For an agricultural society dependent upon the land for food and goods to trade help from these fertility gods was appealing. Elijah's challenge to the prophets' of Baal on Mt. Carmel was a public contest: Yahweh's power matched against that of Baal and Asherah, the one Prophet, Elijah, pitted against the 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. In the end, it wasn't much of a contest. For the prophets of Baal never even got out of the starting blocks.

In 21st century America, the contest between God and the gods of culture is still being waged in your life and in mine. This morning, I would like to alert you to the activity of five powerfully alluring cultural gods, who are presently seeking your worship. I have listed the gods in the first column of the sheet handed out with your worship bulletin. They are the Gods of

More, Image, Success, Escape, and Relationship.
Let's look at them one at a time.

I

The first is **the god More**. The dilemma that the god of More purports to alleviate is our felt sense of emptiness -- the experience of meaninglessness in contemporary society. We worship the god of More in at least three ways: in the unabashed consumerism pervading American society, in our preoccupation with the accumulation of wealth, and our seemingly benign obsession with technology and technological advances.

The idols of More erected upon various altars are the thing, the dollar, and those technological gadgets that help us to be *more* efficient, give us quick access to *more* information, thereby creating the illusion of *more* time. How many of us carry not just cell phones, but smart phones – iphones – a computer in the pocket?

The temples of More are all around us. We call them Malls, Wall Street, Financial Districts, the Silicon Valley, the Apple Store, Fry's and Comp USA. The priests who direct us in our worship of More are

vendors, advertising executives, venture capitalists, investment bankers, stock brokers, investment counselors, and of course, the late Steve Jobs, whose impact is still being felt, and Bill Gates.

In contrast to the god of More, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ addresses our existential sense of emptiness not by giving us more things, money, or computer gadgets, but by infusing our lives with purpose and meaning beyond the material, calling us to participate in God's work of re-creating the world, calling us to service within the Kingdom of God.

With regard to our material needs, what God promises is what he gave Elijah -- enough, not *more* than enough, because more is never enough. You remember the story of Elijah and the widow (I Kings 17:8-16). Every time the widow would open the jar to get some grain to bake a cake there was always enough – enough for Elijah, enough for her and enough for her son. There was always enough even though from the start it appeared that there was hardly enough for even one more cake for her son before he died of starvation.

II

The second god who is seeking your worship is the **god of Image**. The god of Image captures our attention, because from childhood, there is planted developmentally within each of us a seed of self-doubt. In time, that seed may grow and become the threatening weed of low self-esteem.

We express our worship of the god of Image in at least four ways: in our obsession with fitness, our pursuit of beauty, our enthusiastic embrace of new fashion trends, and our infatuation with symbols of status.

The idol of Image worship is the body and the way the body looks surrounded by the symbols of status. What I mean by that last statement is that we don't just purchase, for example, cars to move us from point A to point B, we purchase cars for the image they project about us out to the world. How else can you explain the Ferraris, Porches, Lamborghinis, and Escalades parked conspicuously in the circular drives of homes or the other SUV's we drive whose wheels have never and will never roll over the irregularities of a bumpy, rain soaked dirt road.

Worship of the god of Image is conducted in various places: in the temples of the gym, the spa, and the athletic club; in the temple of the beauty parlor, salon or boutique. Anywhere and everywhere we find a mirror, we may pause to look and worship the god of Image. On the road, in the home, even in church, wherever others can see us amidst our symbols of status, the god of Image may be worshiped.

The priests who serve at the altar of Image are Dr. Oz, our personal trainers, beauticians, manicurists, fashion designers, and all those admiring observers.

Image is not in itself a bad thing. The God we know in Jesus Christ originally created us in God's own image. That image has been corrupted by sin. God seeks to heal this damaged image by making it possible for us through Christ to experience re-creation. God wills to get to the core of our self-esteem dilemma. Our problem is not so much emotional as it is existential. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. What we need is the healing balm of grace and forgiveness. Without the grace bestowed upon us by the redemptive work of Jesus Christ's life, death, and resurrection our lives are fraught with offence.

III

The third 21st century god, who seeks our worship, is the **god of Success**. This god is alluring because in our achievement orientated society we don't often experience ourselves as being loved for our being without reference to our doing.

Worship of the god of success is expressed in our love of the game. The idol is winning. The three major temples are the stadium, the boardroom, and the schoolhouse.

The temples of the stadium are not just the HP Pavilion, Candlestick and PacBell Parks of professional sports, but the Little League and Competitive Youth Soccer fields as well. The priests in all of these temples are the coaches, owners, parents and managers of the teams.

In the temple of the boardroom, the priests are the CEOs and CFOs. I don't know what you think of Martha Stewart, but I don't believe billionaires are motivated any longer by greed. Martha was seeking success and victory in the marketplace, in the stock market, because like all of us she needs to experience herself as a person of value, worth, and significance. Caught up in the game and the gamesmanship of corporate life, she cheated. At Enron it was the same

thing. There are corked bats and steroids in all the temples dedicated to the god of Success.

The schoolhouse is also one of those temples. How often are students seeking the prize of the grade, degree, or admission to the next higher schoolhouse instead of the knowledge and understanding that can be gained in the process of education? At Stanford University, Denise Pope has written a disturbing book describing the destructive game being played by many of the nation's top high school students. She calls the game and the book "doing school." It is a game filled with anxiety, physical exhaustion, cheating, and a disregard for learning. Her research suggests that our brightest and best master the game, but pay a steep price for their success. The price is integrity, character, and learning. As a recent film on the issue calls it, it is the "Road to Nowhere." And we parents are in part culpable, like the father who sued the Sequoia Union High School District this year for disciplining his son for cheating on an AP (advanced placement) class assignment. Our moral compass gets tilted by the god of Success.

In contrast to the god of Success, who encourages our doing as a means of earning love, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ simply heals our wounded heart with unconditional love – love for our being,

while forgiving our doing. God affirms us as people of significance knowing full well how we have failed to be the people we were created to be, the people we would actually like to be.

IV

The fourth god, who our culture lures us to worship, is the **god of Escape**. In a world filled with demands, in a world wrought with pain and suffering, the temptation to *run* away to the altar of Escape is pervasive.

There are many avenues upon which to embark if one wants to worship Escape. Let me mention just four of them. First, there is the arena of drug and alcohol abuse. The idol is the bottle or pill. The temple is anywhere the party ritual may be conducted. The priest is your local supplier or dealer, liquor store, or favorite winery.

A second avenue for worshiping the god of Escape is the vacation. Note that the root of the word vacation is “to vacate,” a synonym for the word “escape.” In other countries, this same tradition is called going on *holiday*, a contraction of the words *holy* and *day*. The idols of the god Escape are the trip and travel itself. The temple is the resort. The priest is your trusted travel agent, consultant, Orbitz or Expedia.

The other whole industry that is devoted to the god of escape is entertainment. The idol of course is the celebrity, the temple is the theater, and the priests are the critics, who help shape the industry with their thumbs up and thumbs down. How many of us sit in front of the television just to veg out?

Ironically, the fourth devotee of the god of Escape is the phenomena we call work-a-holism. The idol is productivity, for productivity gives us justification for making the escape. This idol facilitates escape from the family. The temple is the office. The high priest is the demanding boss.

What God through the ministry of the Holy Spirit gives to us in the midst of the chaos of our world is not escape, but peace -- a peace that passes all understanding -- a peace that enabled a Mother Teresa in midst of dying people to say, "What suffering?" -- a peace that frees us to give further expression to the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, and self-control.

V

The fifth and final god who we may find ourselves inadvertently worshiping in our culture is the **god of Relationship**. The dilemma or void that motivates our worship of Relationship is a pervasive sense of loneliness. We worship the god of Relationship in at least three ways: in our consumption of pop psychology, in our obsession with romance and the experience of ‘falling in love’, and in our over zealous devotion to family. Here the potential idols are the people you love the most: yourself, your lover, your child or parent. The temples are the chairs where we read those self-help books; the bedroom; and the home. The priests who instruct us in the worship of Relationship are Dr. Phil, Dr. Ruth, and Dr. Spock.

God, on the other hand, heals our loneliness by his presence in community. God’s gift in light of our existential need is the Spirit of God, who lives both inside and outside of us in the body of Christ, the church.

VI

The question I have tried to raise this morning was put very powerfully by the Prophet Elijah to the people of God in our Scripture lesson when he said, “How long will you go limping with two different opinions?” If the Lord is God follow him; but if More, Image, Success, Escape, or Relationship are god then follow them. As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. Amen.