

The City of God and the City of Man

– Rev. Dan Scott –

Ministry outside of the context of Community Building will not overturn the trends of evil that we see present in our times. The call is not to "do" more ministry, but to take the call of the Church to be an alternative society to the kingdoms of this earth more seriously.

Revelation chapter 18, says: "After these things I saw an angel coming down from heaven having great authority, and the earth was illuminated with his glory. And he cried mightily with a loud voice, saying, "Babylon the Great is fallen and has become a dwelling place for demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird. For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication. The kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have become rich through the abundance of her luxury... And I heard another voice from heaven saying "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sin, and lest you receive of her plagues."

Revelation, chapter 21, verse 10: "And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clearest crystal and she had a great and high wall with twelve gates, and twelve angels at the gates, and names written on them which are the names of the twelve tribes of the children of Israel."

I'm going to talk about cities this evening. That's the theme of our conference, and I'm going to share with you some things about cities. One of the great themes running through the whole of scripture is the contrast between Jerusalem and Babylon. It begins in the first book of the Bible, and runs all the way through to the last, the Apocalypse we just read from.

In the book of Genesis, Babel is a place of confusion, of humanistic aspirations and worldly extravagance. Salem, or Jerusalem, is, on the other hand, a city where the King of Peace dwells, He who has neither beginning of days nor father or mother, a priest unto God Most High. This contrast continues throughout scripture and St. Augustine used this theme in his powerful defense of the Christian faith in the Church which he appropriately called, The City of God.

Now, if one was to look through earthly eyes, Jerusalem holds no light to Babylon. It is a muddy little town, insignificant in the pull and tug of great powers. On the other hand, Babylon was commercial, Babylon was elegant, Babylon was bright, Babylon was full of light.

Babel is a place of confusion, of humanistic aspirations, of wordly extravagance. Jerusalem, on the other hand, a city where the King of Peace dwells.

But the eye of faith reveals something that the physical eye cannot see. It was from Babylon that the Jewish writer wrote and prayed, "If I forget thee, oh Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if I remember Jerusalem not above my chief joy." And that has always been the heart of God's people, praising God with the spiritual sense for that unseen city of God, even in the midst of these great cities of man.

Man reaches the apex of human achievement in cities. The history of the world can be told in reference to its cities: Rome, Athens, Constantinople, Carthage, Florence, Paris, London, Berlin, New York, on and on. The great works of art, the mighty political upheavals, and the definition of acceptable linguistic dialects within a nation are always defined in urban terms. That's the history of class, of culture, and of upward mobility.

But growing alongside this great march of human civilization has been an alternate course, an alternate flow of history. It's often overlooked, underestimated, and it's even despised. But in the estimation of God, it's this alternate civilization, this other city, that provides the real light of the world. She is ruled by a different king, and she orders her affairs by a different system of values than the secular city.

WE LONG FOR THE CITY TO COME

One of the lessons that men and women of God learn during their pilgrimage on this earth is that we have here no abiding city. Our final allegiance must never go to Babylon. Our security must not rest in her because human cities are ever on the rise and on the decline. Even Babylon as a place is now only a metaphor to use in literature. The actual physical city of Babylon is long gone. When we put our trust in human civilization, we are asking for disappointment. I realized this recently, and now I want to tell you about it.

Two years ago this August I lost my paternal grandmother. It wasn't unexpected since she was 93 years old. I expected to grieve for her, but I didn't expect to experience another component of my grief that I think will shine some light on this message tonight, another emotional flood that burst through my mind in the week after her death.

As I drove to West Virginia to attend the funeral, I reflected on the days gone by. My family has lived, now, for a hundred years in the sleepy little town of Chesapeake, West Virginia. They lived another hundred years before that just fifteen miles back into the hills of Boone County, and they spent two generations before that wandering from the coast where they had landed in the year prior to the American Revolution. They worked those mountain sides and made the old stony ground grow potatoes. They planted grape arbors that helped them make grape jelly, among other liquid items that they felt necessary for their survival. The women made quilts and apple butter, the men grew corn and potatoes, and they hunted and fished.

By the time I came along most of my family had moved to the bottom of the mountain where the slopes of the Appalachians kissed that great Kenaw River, and out into the river was an island that belonged to my family. They farmed the island and they lived in the village of Chesapeake. My great aunt lived just up the river a bit, another great aunt lived down the lane in the house that my great grandfather, who died just before I was born, had built. Cousins all around, cousins once removed, twice removed-some of them had been forcibly removed-all lived around these parts.

In those days if an adult saw a child that they didn't know playing, they'd just ask, "Who are your folks?" Everyone identified you by your genealogy. As a child I was blessed to know three of my great grandparents, all four of my grandparents, most of my uncles and great uncles and aunts, and hundreds of people that I placed in convenient slots in my mind according to how they were related to me.

Friendships were formed that lasted for generations. Enemies were formed and maintained the same way. "The Jones' were good folks, the Smiths no good." Those were the formulas one worked by. I was having eyes for a young lady in my school, and my grandma said "That girl is a Smith." "Yeah, I know that." "Well, they're no good-leave 'em alone." And I said, "Well why?" "Well, because. They're no good." "Well why?" "Well because, they're just not, and that's enough."

Those were some of the thoughts going through my mind as I returned home to bury my grandmother with my own children and wife in the car with me. When I arrived home, several of my uncles and aunts were already there sitting under grandma's willow trees on the banks of the river. As I saw them, suddenly a horror swept over me because I realized we were not there just to bury grandmother. Her death had called us from around the world to do what we had refused to do until that time

because we would not only bury her, we would, at this point, be forced to bury our past. We all knew that this was the end of the street. Two hundred years of history was ending here. The house would be sold, and the island where my grandpa and his father and grandfather farmed-it was the end of all that.

We decided to march all together down to the funeral, down the main street of the village there. Our clan had fourteen children, fifty-six grandchildren, and 115 great grandchildren, the majority of whom went marching that day into the church my great grandfather had built. It was where Pastor Durst had dedicated me to Christ... where I had scribbled with crayons on the wall as a young boy, and where generations of my family had worshipped the Lord.

After that service, we buried my grandma. We recited the 23rd Psalm together and gave her up to the Lord with terrible sadness. As I left that place where five generations of my family sleep, I knew that I was leaving more than grandmother behind. I was leaving behind a way of life, a linguistic dialect that's unacceptable anywhere else, and my community. And I'm left now with modern America, a place where old people are a nuisance, and children a drain on the time that one could use to follow success. And that experience continues to hurt, and I doubt that that hurt will ever go away.

I look for silly things now, like sidewalks, and realize that in our paceless subdivisions no one needs a sidewalk anymore to connect them to their neighbor because we won't be going there anyway. As for my family, I now see my father and mother twice a year, uncles and aunts every five or six and most cousins never again. My community, and no doubt your community, is gone forever. Of course to console us we have satellite dishes and VCR's, wonderful things like that.

There's a quiet fear many of us are facing now that community life as we have known it is all but gone. The fact is our communities have been swallowed up and digested by the unrelenting march of global urbanization. Our whole national culture is in the midst of fundamental realignment.

AN INCREASING WORLD-WIDE PHENOMENON: GLOBAL URBANIZATION

Let's talk just a moment about global urbanization. In 1950, 44% of the population of the industrialized countries of the world lived in urban centers. By 1975 that percentage had grown to 75%, and by the year 2,000, expect the figure to go to 80% of the world's people in industrialized nations living in cities. The developing world has a similar story. In 1950, 29% of the people lived in cities, growing to 40% in 1975, projected to be 70% by the year 2,000. By the end of this decade, 7 out of 10 persons world-wide will live in cities.

This urbanization is a global phenomenon, and it represents profound and unparalleled social change. The world's cities are beginning to connect to the point that London, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Boston, and other cities have more in common with one another than the towns and villages of their respective countries. The peoples of the world and the peoples of the city are migrating to other world cities so that the racial complexion, the moral and social values, and the living styles of these world cities resemble one another more and more with the passing years. Cities that are not yet world-class cities, such as Nashville, tend to copy their larger counterparts out of this human need not to appear backward and naive.

Global urbanization now affects the farmlands, and mountain areas of America as well. Once the events of Tokyo, New York, and San Francisco seemed far away and somewhat irrelevant to rural folks. But not anymore. Satellite dishes, computers, fax machines, stereo systems, all ensure that the members of the emerging generation will participate in the urban culture to some extent even if they live in Red Hat, Idaho.

This urban culture demands sociological adjustments in the human personality that must be taken into account by any institution that plans to survive. For example, people who live in great crowds tend to become more distant, less personal. They insulate themselves against sensory overload by withdrawing from life. But paradoxically they crave intimacy, and this tension in their lives often results in separating intimacy from long-term commitment which is a chief contributor to the sexual deviancies that are growing in astronomical ways all across our nation.

The economic realities of modern cities demand a fast pace and a preoccupation with economic survival. In rural life the neighbors and family can bring vegetables from their garden if you have a few bad months. In an urban setting a few bad months means you'll live in the street. Urban poverty and rural poverty are totally separated from one another. People tend to keep pushing themselves because they never feel quite financially secure, even when they're doing rather well. This means they have much less leisure time, or time for reflection. People compartmentalize their lives into segments and deal with different people in different ways, and some even according to different values. The wear and tear on the human psyche is great and fundamental.

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This process of global urbanization impacts our American church in profound and fundamental ways. The sad truth concerning evangelicals in North America is that we are many but not much. Our place in the city square has been taken from us, thousands of churches are closing their doors, and thousands more are now financially supported by elder members with precious memories. And in spite of this, the American churches in the American denominations are doing business as usual. The cultural complexion of our churches is increasingly anachronistic- it's out of touch-and it will not touch the modern American non-churched man.

The failure of our churches is not due to a lack of sincerity, to a substandard faith, or to a loss of love for Jesus Christ. Some of those factors have been at work, no doubt, but the main problem has been the insistence of these churches in maintaining styles of ministry that ministered to another age but which do not communicate to our own time. The music, the times for worship, and the ethnic complexion of our churches and their leadership have all been imported from a rural America in the early part of the century, a "Norman Rockwell" America that no longer exists.

The cruel and terribly uncomfortable truth is that due to global urbanization, the targeted audiences that our churches have always reached for become smaller with each passing month. Most of our urban churches were founded on colonies of rural people that migrated to the city to work. These urban evangelical churches tended to preserve a rural character even though they were located physically in the city. These churches will not survive in the new American environment, and I say that with a great deal of sadness.

Because of these facts, there's a shuffle going on among American believers everywhere. People are migrating from the many small to the few large congregations. Churches like ours, Christ Church, are the result of this phenomenon. And there's a lot of excitement going on in these large gatherings. Churches are growing from nothing to mammoth size sometimes overnight. But the excitement there is due to a narrow range of vision. We do not seem to understand, brothers and sisters, that much of the growth of the large churches is due to the general failure of American Christianity.

The overall picture reveals that American evangelicalism is not experiencing any measurable growth and has not for over 20 years. The growth of the so-called "megachurches" is in many ways like reorganizing the crew of the Titanic. And like the Titanic these large churches are prime targets and easy marks. One large blow can destroy most American congregations. We've seen this happen to churches in our own city, and there will be others, because there's an unceasing war being waged from secular humanistic quarters that will see no stone unturned in the drive to discredit the Christian church, that is, if we don't discredit ourselves first.

We've entered a time in our nation where the approach of the church has to be increasingly modeled after missionary movements in non-Christian nations. We must begin to see that the great mass of unchurched America is pagan, has no understanding of the Christian Faith, and is increasingly influenced by spiritual experiences more akin to witch doctors and voo-doo than European academia. Roman Catholic Archbishop O'Connor just last month called for his priests to familiarize themselves with the ancient rite of exorcism. He said the devil is loose in America. A reporter said "Surely you mean a metaphorical devil." He said, "No, I mean a devil devil. It exists in real people and must come out in the name of Jesus."

Charismatic and Pentecostal churches have an advantage in this new environment. Our approach to spiritual phenomena is more in tune with the new North American than the older established churches with their roots in Europe. But that's not necessarily a hopeful sign. Much of our content has been lost as we have moved increasingly to the idea of a religious circus on Sunday. It seems that American Pentecostals and charismatics have a fatal attraction with show business. The name of the game seems to be "Lights, camera, action," and I seriously doubt that such an anemic form of Christianity will be able to hold its own against the world, the flesh, and the devil.

I'm trying to paint a picture to get us out of complacency, but I'm not trying to get us to abandon any more of the "faith once delivered to the saints." The fact that some of our leaders who are in the public eye, as well as many pastors of local assemblies, are biblically illiterate, hopelessly out of touch with the needs of their flock, and terribly susceptible to the periodic spiritual fads that sweep the "National Enquirer" side of charismatic "la-la" land.

THE POWER AND RELEVANCE TODAY OF OUR CHRISTIAN HERITAGE

To face the upcoming challenges, we desperately need to arm ourselves with the lessons learned from past pages of Christianity. The history, hymns, liturgies, creeds, and councils of the past can be powerfully repackaged to meet our present challenge. St. Augustine and John Calvin have more to say to the modern church than "Brother Billy Bob" on channel 5. It just takes more work to make their message available to modern audiences.

Now this appeal to the Christian heritage flies in the face of the notion that's popular in our charismatic and Pentecostal circles that the past 2,000 years has been one great wasteland, one big mistake, and we can create some "gospel utopia" now with new apostles and prophets, and new revelations. Brothers, that idea is bankrupt and disastrous. Have we made no progress at all in 2,000 years? Are all the martyrs of the last 2,000 years and all of the scholarship, and all of the things that we've done,

and all the churches we've built, absolutely one big waste, one big farce, when our Lord said, "I'll build my church and the gates of hell won't prevail against it?" That doesn't make a hill of beans worth of sense.

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We must be as responsible in the transmission of our Christian heritage as we are in the transmission of our Christian experience. Christians have always contributed to the arts, the literature, science and philosophy of abandonment of these responsibilities, we abdicated the town square long before the secular crowd made it official. A shimmy, a shake, and a prosperity plan, lights, camera, and action will not turn back the powers of hell. Light for the city will take more discipline and energy than that.

Having said all that about our Christian past, I must also say tonight that the present times will not allow for the cold academic air of some of our old churches. A song and a lecture will neither draw people nor keep them. Churches need a celebration time when the more charismatic style of joyful praise is experienced. Our American people want this. We will also see a resurgence of pageantry and symbolism in the coming days because a rootless generation is searching for something that's been around for a long time. We're apt to see churches emerge that offer a smorgasbord of high liturgy together with high voltage celebration. The losers will be those evangelical churches that continue to lecture their attenders and to provide for the needs of the generation long dead.

Successful churches will have to develop and proclaim a strong, Bible-centered message on the worth of the human being, that we are made in the image and likeness of God. Modern Americans feel increasingly insignificant and diminished because of technology and the massive crowds they live in. A church that makes a person feel significant and needed will never lack for members.

We have to find ways of penetrating the ghettos and penthouses, as well as middle-class suburbia. "Leave it to Beaver" is now only an exhibit for a museum. Modern America doesn't live that way, so we have to push back our comfort zones like missionaries to our own land. We have to learn the way the natives live. We have to adapt where we can, we have to challenge them to change in the places where our gospel forbids us to change. We always have to be strategizing, always on the move.

We'll have to sooner or later get it through our heads that the people we face on Sunday are increasingly illiterate about the very basic Bible stories, usually high on some drug - either legal or illegal - Christian people have legal drugs, non-Christians have illegal drugs. They are preoccupied by failing marriages. They're preoccupied with job insecurities and addictions of all kinds. Most of our messages have no relevance to them whatsoever, and that's why they go glassy-eyed when you open up your Bible.

God knows we need the power of the Holy Spirit in the coming days. There's an increasing need for power encounter between the forces of God and the power of evil. A balanced and biblical ministry of exorcism will become more common in our assemblies. We should study and seek God to keep from falling into the extremes on this issue, but in the new America it will become a needed part of our ministry.

We have to find the proper balance between innovation and permanence. There has to be something in our lives that does not move, a North Star by which we orient ourselves. At one level our church has to be adapting to a new age, and in other ways she has to resist the opposite tendency to change for the sake of change.

We are, you see, my brothers and sisters, an ancient Kingdom. Our values are as old as the earth, and in every age there have been those who've lived by the principles that we hold dear tonight. Our American people long for these values. Do you see what I'm saying? We have to learn how to combine the old and the new. Like the Israelites carrying the bones of Joseph into a new age, we have to learn how to carry our Christian faith to these modern urban centers. In the midst of such a changing unstable scene that we've witnessed in our modern America, the soul of man is screaming for permanence.

While we laugh with the laughing machine, line after boring line fed to us by our Hollywood masters in 30-minute segments, the soul hungers and thirsts for real friends and real family, and we doubt deep in our soul that we'll ever know such community again. We believe that all real community life in our country is dead, and that's the pain-the acute and terrible pain-of the baby-boomer mid-life crises across our nation.

THE ON-GOING MARCH ON GOD'S FAITHFUL

But, you see, there is an enduring community, a community that has survived, and will continue to survive. Our enduring community is a city whose foundations are not upon this earth, surrounded by cities built on sand, most of which will soon be desolate. Jesus said, "Upon this rock I will build my ecclesia, my community, and even if hell itself will rage against my community, it will survive."

I'll tell you a bit about this community. It was built on the location where Abraham by faith looked for a city whose builder and maker was God. It has survived the fire of Nero, the stadium of Rome, the wrath of Mohammed, the invasion of Constantinople, the flight of the Pilgrims, the slaughter of the Armenians, the hatred of Hitler, and the lunacy of Stalin. This community was developed in the blood of the holy apostles who loved not their life unto death. It was preserved by the courage of countless martyrs under the Romans. It was defined against destructive ideologies by our church fathers. It was called to repentance by its Reformers. It has been spread through the world by its missionaries. It has been rebuked in times of apostasy and corruption by its prophets. It's been instructed and enlightened by its teachers. It's been loved and nurtured by its pastors. It has endured the leadership of wicked men, the foolish division of its energies into mutually hostile parties, the arrogance of those people who, now armed with some new spiritual fad, suddenly know more than all the accumulated wisdom of the saints of God throughout the ages.

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It preserved ancient learning during the economic and the intellectual breakdown of Europe after the fall of Rome when thousands of unnamed monks worked year after year to copy the Bible one copy at a time so that you can now enjoy 16 copies per household in America. And not only the Bible. Aristotle, Plato, Homer, even the enemies of the church like Marcus Aurelius- all of these were preserved by the multitudes of selfless men and women through the centuries when no one knew, and no one cared, about these works. Humanism, as well as humanity, owes to us the preservation of its culture.

It sheltered the artists that gave us the priceless collections for our museums, and musicians who lift the human spirit like Bach, Handel, and Mendelssohn. The church built the major universities of our nation when our country was just a child. Hospitals right in our own city like St. Thomas, Baptist Hospital, Tennessee Christian Medical Center, were all built by Christian churches.

All over the world, even in countries with few Christian churches, people know when you've lost everything and no one cares, when you're hungry and when you're naked, you can find people who care under the shadow of a cross. Liberal Christians, conservative Christians, Greek Christians, Roman, black, white, Baptist, Pentecostal, Catholic Christians, all disagreeing in all kinds of things suddenly find

ways to fill in the gaps when there is disaster, when there is tragedy, and when there is hurt.

When the dam broke a few years ago in West Virginia, even the gentle and the isolated Amish found the time to come out of isolation and built dozens of homes, free of charge, for the homeless survivors. If you can't afford a psychiatrist, a preacher will listen to you for free and do you more good. When you walk through the valley of the shadow of death, a Christian will hold your hand and quote the soothing words of David.

We've bathed the dying lepers in Calcutta, we invent alphabets for isolated language groups. We send doctors to live in obscurity in villages on the edge of civilization. We don't think it a waste to send our sons who may prepare for years in a university to some remote part of the earth to care for those who may or may not appreciate it. We care for the homeless, we comfort the feeble-minded, we rebuild damaged lives. We're the church - that's our job description.

In return, our country refuses to allow us a simple nativity scene on public property to celebrate one of our two high holy days. In return, our country will not allow teachers to read the Bible to themselves on break if students are present, as if our holy scripture was some unspeakable obscenity. In return, our media portrays every priest, every minister, as some fool, some thieving conniving clown. In return, a growing number of our fellow citizens now feel we should never speak about public issues at all if we're to retain our tax exemption. That's a part of the eternal tension that exists between the city of man and the city of God, and it is inevitable, but we keep on. If the Lord allows time to go on, the church will still be serving humanity when Norman Lear is 500 years dead because we are, you see, quite indestructible.

BUILDING LOCAL COMMUNITIES: AN INVALUABLE AND NECESSARY TASK.

One of the ways the church survives is by establishing little communities that we call local churches. We're always doing that in every century throughout the world, and we've got to learn how to do it now in urban centers and settings very different from what we've known before. But we will learn.

Now can you tell me, brothers and sisters, anything you will do in life that's more valuable than the establishment of a local assembly? Because right here we plan to grow up creative, intelligent, and useful citizens for our nation. We plan to produce and send out future writers, artists, business persons, and public figures, as well as missionaries to light up the far distant points of the compass. We will not, we have not, we are not going to abdicate these responsibilities, because we are the life of the city.

This church is more than just one social obligation among all others; it's our life. We expect to form our life-long relationships here. We want a haven where we can grow our children away from the madness of a culture gone insane. That's what we're about. This is not a concert hall, it's not a social club, and it's not a business. It's all those things, of course, but it's greater than any of them. It's the ark of God that will carry us over the waters of the meaninglessness of our times. It's the angel of God to lead us from Sodom. For John it was the new Jerusalem coming down from God out of Heaven, the bride of Christ. For Paul it was the Israel of God, the commonwealth of faith. For Jesus it was the future government of men and of angels. For St. Augustine it was the City of God, and for me, tonight, my brothers and sisters, it is my home, the repository of my values, and my enduring community.

Here at Christ Church we're moved with fear to build an ark for the saving of our household. We're trying to create a great lighthouse from which we shine the light that will save the thousands of ships now perishing in the flood outside. We have to bind the broken hearts of this age. If we give of ourselves, if we pour our lives into this vision we will build for ourselves and our children a community where we and they can grow secure in the warmth of friendship, their family, and the love of Jesus Christ. It will be a real community in the midst of the urban mass.

Finally my friends, our hope rests in the God who folds the darkness of night every morning in a carefully guarded place, who spreads a symphony of color across the east accompanied by the music of roosters and redbirds. Our hope rests in the church, the mother of us all, the community that endures, age after age until the Ageless One declares time to be no more. That's why I confess boldly, "I believe in God the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord," as well as all the other essentials the Apostle's Creed sums up so well. To God and to His Church we pledge our lives, our resources and our love, a sweet smelling sacrifice to Him who dwells in the midst of the candlesticks: God of gods, Lord of lords, King of kings. To Him alone be glory throughout all the ages of ages. Amen.

At the time that this article appeared, Daniel L. Scott, Jr. was serving in full-time ministry as Assistant Pastor on the pastoral staff of Christ Church, Nashville Tennessee.

The above was transcribed from a mid 1990's Word and Spirit conference and appeared in the periodical, Common Voice (December, Vol 4, Number 2 - exact year cannot be determined as publisher neglected to specify in masthead). This journal went out of publication soon after this article was published.