

The Tale of Two Cities

Is God in control? Or are we victims of circumstance? Fatalists believe whatever happens will happen. If God does not control our lives then everything is uncertain. If He is our God then we can be confident of the future. It is not easy to see God's plan for the world amid the falling institutions and loyalties of our time. But God has a plan! When we look at current events through the eyes of faith, reading newspapers, watching the news, hearing what is happening around the world, we still can see "the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living" (Psalm 27:13).

We are not the first ones to raise questions in dangerous times. St. Augustine (354-430) still has a relevant message for our 21st century. But what can this great North African church father tell us in our age of terrorism? He saw a world in ruins. Christopher Dawson remarked that St. Augustine's age marked "the failure of the greatest experiment in secular civilization the world has ever seen." Ancient Rome was crumbling before the advance of the hordes from the North. When the news of the sack of Rome reached Africa, followed by thousands of desolate refugees, St. Augustine became deeply troubled about what seemed an irrational and Satanic act. Why should the city of such great beauty and revered throughout the centuries be surrendered to the ravages of barbarians?

Supporters of the old pagan religions attributed the fall of Rome to Christianity. They believed the gods had withdrawn their protection from Rome. St. Augustine denied their accusation. He showed that Rome was punished because she worshipped, not because she neglected, such deities. His response to the pagans was a philosophy of history - an attempt to explain the events of recorded time from a Biblical perspective. In his classic *The City of God* he shows that the history of mankind is not the result of change, nor climate, nor human passions. It depended upon the acceptance or non-acceptance of God.

St. Augustine points out that history revolves around the tale of two cities: The earthly city and the heavenly city, also called the city of man and the city of God. St. Augustine wrote: "Mankind is divided into two sorts: such as live according to man, and such as live according to God. These we mystically call the 'two cities' or societies, the one predestined to reign eternally with God, the other condemned to perpetual torment with the Devil."

The City of Man

The modern city of man bears a striking resemblance to the builders of the tower of Babel (the word means: at the gate of the gods). Babel was the city of confusion, the city of the ungodly, devoid of true justice. Its residents attempted to build an enormous tower, which must have required a major organizational effort, perhaps a totalitarian society. They had to operate on the frontiers of technology to build this tower. They did this as a way to make a name for themselves. It had nothing to do with the modern expression referring to reputation; it meant becoming independent. They desired to

exclude God from His creation rather than looking to God for their identity. They took pride in their ability to construct a tower that reached into the heavens. They viewed themselves as gods. The construction of the tower was seen by God as a challenge to His authority. He said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them" (Genesis 11:6).

Like the builders of the Tower of Babel, human beings today have an extraordinary high view of themselves. They want to storm the heavens. They believe in either the innate goodness of man, or in a malleable human nature that can be made good by wise policy and a suitable environment. They believe profoundly in the "redeeming" power of institutions, like the United Nations, the European Union, or whatever, to change and to transform reality. They pretend that we can solve all problems - old and new - with technology and guarantee prosperity. In his most recent book *The Great Disruption* Francis Fukuyama argues that man can not live in the rubble of anarchy for long. His social nature and self-interested reason leads him to "renorm" social life, to invent new moral rules for getting along with his fellow man. In other words, the besetting sin in the city of man is the sin of putting himself in God's place.

Man's independence can lead only to one end - spiritual and material death. Any separation from God is death. Francis Schaeffer said there is death in the city of man because man has turned away from God.

We watch our Western culture being destroyed. It has become a secularized, godless culture, a man-centered culture through and through. This is an age of spectacular progress in the material sphere while at the same we witness an unprecedented decline in the spiritual component in our culture and our personal lives. We live in a society that has rejected its Christian heritage and is proud to be disengaged from God. Secular universities have become an environment and culture in which God no longer has anything to say. He is either declared dead or ignored. Certainty is sought in science. The idolization of science and technology is driven by an apostate religious motivation. Resistance against and rejection of Christianity is increasing. Decisions are made in public and private life on the basis of one's own wisdom.

Prominent newspapers take on a condescending attitude when they write about religion. Christians in the media admit that, if they press for the inclusion of a Christian voice or the reasoned comment from a Christian (especially a conservative Protestant), they are marginalized.

When man says farewell to God, life becomes cheap and brutal. We see this devaluation of man everywhere today, and it is a result of the humanist philosophy that was supposed to exalt him. People with no regard for either God or other human beings are killing each other every single hour in our cities, often for nothing, frequently as little as something as a pair of sneakers or a necklace. Millions have been killed by abortion - in most instances, simply for the convenience of the mother. James M. Boice points out that not only do we behave like animals in our cultural who rush to free ourselves from God, but "in our rebellion we end up doing things even the animals would not do. I do

not know if baboons kill their young. They may. But they do not systematically murder them for their own convenience, as we do our young."

In the city of man people think they can live without restraints. Paul Gauguin, the famous French painter, believed that man ought to be autonomous, completely free. What troubled him was that two plus two always equals four. He wanted to be so free that on a Tuesday morning at eight o'clock he could say 2 and 2 equals four and a half. But he had to live within the restraints of the created order. He could not change it. No one can live without any restraints.

Instead of living without restraints our permissive society has become an addicted society - addicted to gambling, and even to shopping. In *Beyond Fate*, Margaret Visser says, "Our society, relative to most other societies on earth, is rich enough to contain many people who say they 'live to shop' and really believe it.' Shopping for them becomes entertainment, vitality, even identity and self-worth."

The City of God

St. Augustine argued that from the first rebellion of the fallen angels against God "two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self." History is one long tale of the fierce clash between these two cities. Babel's residents desired to make a name for themselves. Jerusalem, the City of God, is where God comes first. As St. Augustine put it, "Those who wish to follow God allow Him to go before and they follow: they do not make Him follow while they go before." In this city the cross of Christ is the prominent symbol. The empty tomb is its hope.

The supreme Lordship of Christ is accepted over every department of life. In the City of God people are free, having intrinsic worth, living in relationship with others while creatively engaged in work and leisure to the glory of God. It is a city of sacrificial love, characterized by the love of God and for God. Love for God is the motive for all Christian actions, values and norms. We see then technology in the light of revelation, in the service of God and man. The City of God is always different in its ambitions, seeking heavenly peace and calling people out of the nations to come to God. This does not mean that the citizens of the City of God are no longer citizens of the earthly city, but they do not derive their ultimate comfort, satisfaction, ambition, or hope from it. The Lord is sovereign over the city of man and the city of God.

We are involved in the life of the city of man. We are surrounded by the culture of Babel. We live in both spheres. While we live in the city of man we still have a task to fulfill. Our job is to build houses, marry, have children. We are to work for the welfare of the city and not our own. (Jeremiah 29: 4-7). We don't flee the city of man in which we live. We pray for the good of the city and for its repentance. The prophet Jonah thought that the wicked city of Nineveh was beyond hope. But God proved him wrong. Nineveh did repent. The repentance of modern Babel is yet possible, and God's representatives must work for that goal.

The New Jerusalem

Christians are not permanent citizens in the city of man. They are sojourners to the New Jerusalem, the eternal City of God. We are "resident aliens." The new Jerusalem will be established at the end of time, but not by human effort. It is the creation of God, the city of the predestined. Nothing can ever remove God's people from communion with their God. This means that the story of the temptation and the fall and the building of the Tower of Babel can never happen again. Christians are like Abraham, the father of all believers, who "looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11: 10).

Christians journey out of bondage to liberation. It is the story about hope and freedom, the freedom illustrated by the Exodus. It is a picture of a journey of people out of bondage to liberation. The prospect of the new city is firmly fixed as the center of the hope and fears of God's people and will continue in this role literally into eternity. We look forward to the New Jerusalem, to that moment when all the nations of the world will be gathered in her, where God will be all in all.

The city of man will be destroyed. At the last judgment mankind will witness the triumph of God over evil. It is in the hope of this final triumph that the course of the world becomes intelligible. Then we may see the rise and fall of empires and the apparent prosperity of the wicked in the light of the coming of the New Jerusalem. When the Lord returns the destiny of the two cities will be made clear.

As St. Augustine described it, "After the resurrection when the final, universal judgment has been completed, there shall be two kingdoms, each with its own distinct boundaries; the one Christ's, the other the devil's; the one consisting of the good, the other of the bad - both, however, consisting of angels and men.

Our Calling

We are no longer living in a Christian culture. On the contrary, our culture is busy shedding the last vestiges of the Christian faith. In fact, it is becoming anti-Christian. Our taxing times should lend urgency to preaching and living the Gospel. We may be tempted to privatize our faith and withdraw from the world. However, there is nothing in St. Augustine and Scripture to suggest that we may escape from the world. While we eagerly look forward to our Lord's return we must continue to be stewards of His creation.

To be stewards in a Babel culture does not mean to seek peace and harmony at the expense of the Gospel. We may not accommodate the gods of Babel - materialism, scientism, technology, consumerism, hedonism, and appeasement, just to note a few. Scripture calls us to be "in the world," even though we are not to be "of the world." *In Beyond Culture Wars*, Michael Horton notes that separation from the world is not physical rather it is a matter of divorcing our dependence on the things of this world.

We should live for the Lord within our present culture. More than ever before we need to bear witness to the Word of God, and stand for righteousness and truth. We should be concerned for the lost without the Savior, the poor and needy, justice and responsible stewardship. The cost of influencing our society is high. In the midst of a culture in which idols are served, we are called to fight the good fight of faith. Will we win the battle? We are not called to be successful but to be faithful. The nearer the end of history the more difficult it will become for Christians who want to be men and women of "the Book." Scripture does not allow for triumphalism. We should not pretend that we can change the direction of our culture. But we should not be discouraged. The darkness of our culture cannot extinguish the light of Christ.

The assurance of our Lord's return and His ultimate victory will help us to live boldly in the midst of a Babel culture. There are no shortcuts. There is no cheap grace. We are called to carry a cross before we will receive a crown. We are called to practice truth even when it is costly. This is the only way the world will take seriously our proclamation of the Gospel. *In Death in the City* Francis Schaeffer points out that "all too often the only antithesis we have exhibited to the world and to our own children has been talking about holiness or our talking about love; rather than the consideration and practice of holiness and love together as truth, in antithesis to what is false in theology, in the church, and the surrounding culture." We cannot do it on our own. We must really believe that God is there and look directly to Him for help.

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