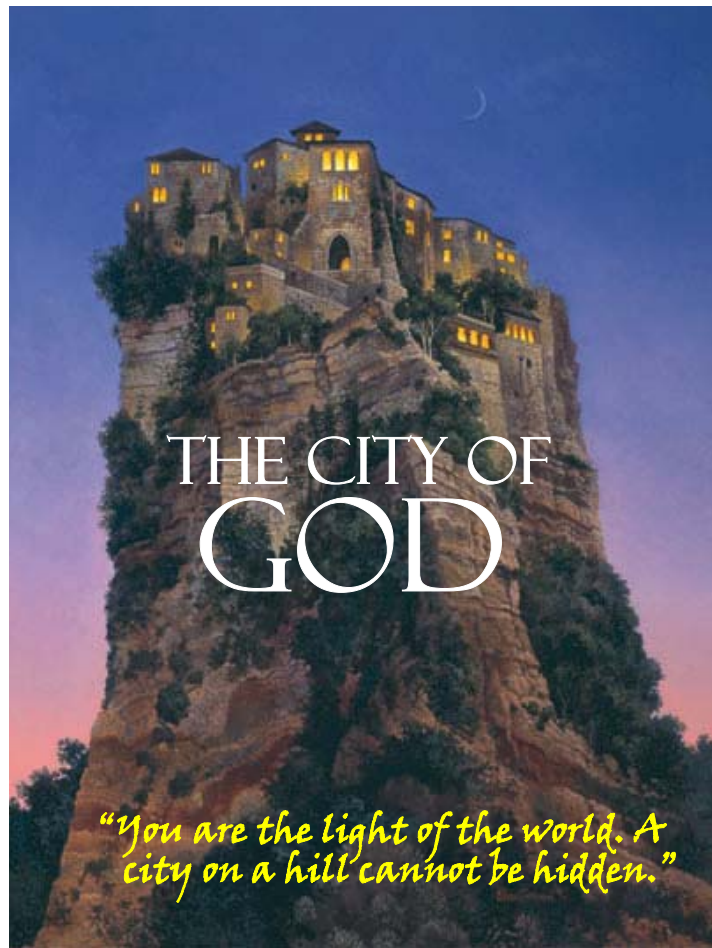


The Covenant Pulpit



THE CITY OF
GOD

"You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden."

"A City on a Hill"

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Dr. Robert Petterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church

6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108

(239) 597-3464

www.covenantnaples.com

The U.S. Supreme Court was about to rule on a landmark case. At issue was a Louisiana state law that required public schools to teach “creation science” alongside evolution. The plaintiffs argued that the law violated the U.S. Constitution’s so-called “separation of church and state” clause.

During NBC’s coverage of the Supreme Court deliberations, news anchor Tom Brokaw interviewed the lawyer representing Louisiana. The attorney said that the state legislature was merely seeking to assure the equal discussion of equally-valid theories regarding the origins of man. He told Mr. Brokaw that the issue wasn’t science or creation, but academic freedom for students to discuss different theories in the classroom.

Mr. Brokaw impatiently shot back at the attorney, “But weren’t many of the sponsors of this bill *religious* people –doing this for *religious* reasons?”

The truth is: those folks might have been *religious* people, yet they really were trying to promote academic freedom in the classroom. But Mr. Brokaw’s response exposes an academic and media bias in America: people with religious motivations have no business bringing their belief system into the national debate; religious convictions might contaminate public policy.

Later, in a *Christianity Today* column, Chuck Colson challenged Tom Brokaw’s assumption. Brokaw fired back a response:

“My questioning of that attorney was an attempt to show that the sponsors of this legislation were specifically attempting to impose their religious values on all the school children of Louisiana. That is a corruption of the Constitution.”

Colson fired off a letter to the NBC news anchor suggesting that, by his reasoning, any laws against murder or robbery proposed by a devout Christian politician could be construed to be an attempt to impose religious values on citizens who didn’t believe in the Ten Commandments. *Any* law based on moral values could be said to be a corruption of the Constitution.

Mr. Brokaw never responded to Chuck Colson’s letter.

My point is not to argue the merits of the Louisiana case, nor to put down Tom Brokaw who has distinguished himself as an outstanding newsman. Rather it is to point out a prevailing view of the secular elite that people who hold to moral absolutes shouldn’t advocate their views in the public square. Religious folk are especially dangerous. But socialists, or even communists,

are welcome to present their economic views on the college campus. A Nazi or terrorist would not be excluded from the political debate, nor would a pedophile, a sadomasochist, a spiritualist, a harmonic convergence convert, or Paris Hilton. Their right to free expression would be zealously defended by the same cultural elite who are so often offended when Evangelical Christians express their views in a public forum, or try to pass legislation outlawing homosexual marriage or partial birth abortion.

At times like this, Christians can feel bullied or marginalized. We are tempted to become discouraged and retreat into Evangelical ghettos. Some of you may be suffering a hangover from a brutal presidential campaign. You invested a lot of emotion in the outcome, and woke up desperately disillusioned on November the 5th. A few of you are convinced that the United States is headed for certain disaster, and you are making plans to head for the hills. Dearly beloved, this is not the time for Christians to disappear into the shadows, or mute their voices in the public square. More than ever, we followers of Christ must pray for our new president and recommit ourselves to being salt and light in this nation. In *The City of God*, St. Augustine gives us a principle that he learned from Jesus Christ:

In this world we have no abiding city, but we must abide in the city.

On August 24, 410 AD Rome was sacked by the barbarian Visigoths. When Rome fell, world economic markets collapsed. Anarchy swept away law and order. Europe began her torturous descent into the Dark Ages.

When the news reached North Africa, panic-stricken Christians rushed to their bishop, St. Augustine. To help them come to grips with the fall of Rome, Augustine wrote one of history's great books. He called it *De Civitate Dei contra Paganos*, which is Latin for "The City of God against the Pagans." We know it simply as *The City of God*.

St. Augustine said that there were two cities: *de civitate homi* (the city of man) and *De Civitate Dei* (the city of God). The *City of God* is the spiritual city in the secular *city of man*; the spiritual state within the visible state. Though Christians live in cities of men, they are citizens of the *City of God*. Like our father Abraham, we have no abiding cities in this world. But Jesus says that we are to abide in the cities of men. We are called to be light in the darkness and salt that stems the moral decay in the cities of men.

St. Augustine's *City of God* is as relevant in today's world as it was 1600 years ago. Islamic terrorism, seismic shifts in our geopolitical landscape, and

economic chaos threaten to unravel our civilization. The barbarians are at our gates as surely as they were at Rome's on August 24, 410 AD. We might be tempted to be seized with panic or fall into despair.

But, in *The City of God*, Augustine reminds us of Jesus' words in Matthew 5:14, "You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden." The *City of God* is a city of light. We Christians are not called to hide. Instead, we are called to shine brightly. Without apology to Tom Brokaw, we *religious* folk should raise our voices in the public arena. We ought to work tirelessly for a moral renaissance in our land. Far from corrupting our Constitution, our spiritual faith just might save America. Here are three things that we can learn from Jesus' words in the 5th chapter of Matthew's gospel:

1. Two Reactions When Barbarians Sack the Cities of Men:

When Christians heard about the fall of Rome, they rushed to St. Augustine with two reactions. I see the same responses in American Christians today:

1. Fear because our security is in the city

Christians cried out to Augustine, "Where is our future now that Rome has fallen?" They fell apart emotionally because they had put their security in a city conceived and built by flawed men. It is ironic that Christians should have lamented the fall of Rome. For more than 300 years the Emperors of Rome had unleashed horrific persecutions against the followers of Jesus. St. John referred to Rome as *the Beast*. Peter and Paul were both martyred in Rome. The 2nd Century bishop Tertullian wrote, "Rome is drunk with the blood of the martyrs." For 300 years Rome terrorized the *City of God*.

Somewhere around 314 AD, Emperor Constantine embraced Christianity. He declared it to be the favored religion of the Empire. By the year 410 Rome was the center of Christianity. Her bishop was the most powerful of all bishops. The Emperor of Rome was declared *The Defender of the Faith*. Some even called Rome the *City of God*! Church folk in Augustine's day found their identity as much in being a Roman as in being a Christian. To them, Rome and the *City of God* were one and the same. Rome had become their security.

Augustine says to his people, "You were wrong to find your identity and security in Rome." Some 1600 years later, he would say that too many of us see our identity as Americans. We've thought that being an Evangelical Christian and a politically-conservative American was one in the same. We

put our hope in political systems advancing God's Kingdom. We thought Washington DC held the key to our future. Then we invested our treasures in *Wall Street* rather than the *City of God*. Like Roman Christians, we have set ourselves up for disillusionment. Worse than that: we have lost our pungency as salt. We are in danger of falling under the indictment of verse thirteen: "But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good except to be thrown out and trampled by men."

2) *Flight because we have given up on the city*

The other reaction of the people in St. Augustine's day was to abandon what was left of Rome to the barbarians. Thousands of Christians fled Rome. Augustine said that those who want to run from the cities of men, or fade into the shadows of anonymity, are wrong. Tom Brokaw would like us to do that. But Jesus says in verse 13 that we are the salt of the earth. We have to get out of the salt shaker. He says in verses 14&15, "A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do men light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on a stand and it gives light to everyone in the house." Notice that word *everyone* in verse fifteen! Jesus doesn't want anyone in the city to miss the light. In verse 16 he says, "...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good works..." Christians are to be visible in the city.

Thank God for St. Augustine. In the centuries that followed Rome's fall, Europe descended into the Dark Ages. But, a new civilization rose out of the rubble of Rome. For a thousand years, other than the Bible, the most read book in Europe was *The City of God*. Inspired by its vision, monks built monasteries that became the centers of education. Christians erected hospitals and cathedrals. Missionaries like St. Patrick brought the gospel to dark places like Ireland. And the greatest civilization that the world has ever known was born in Europe, out of the ashes of Rome. St. Augustine would agree with Yogi Berra: "It's never over 'til it's over." We owe it to our children to pass on to them what those brave souls passed on to us.

2. Five Approaches to the Cities of Men by the Citizens of Heaven

Throughout the Scriptures, God's people have approached the *cities of men* in several different ways. I see five models:

1) Lot *consumed* the resources of Sodom for his profit.

While his uncle Abraham lived outside the cities, Genesis 13:13 says, "Lot pitched his tent *toward* Sodom." Before long he and his family left their tent

for the city. Why did Lot choose Sodom? Genesis 13:10&11 says, "Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered like the garden of the Lord... (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah). So Lot chose for himself the plain of the Jordan..." Lot had huge herds of sheep and cattle. The land around Sodom was lush for grazing. The city was at the crossroads of the great trade routes that moved from Egypt to Mesopotamia. Lot could make a big profit in the stock markets of Sodom. He lived in that wicked city for several years, but he never made a difference. The truth is: Lot didn't like Sodom. St. Peter later writes that the whole time he was in the city "his righteous soul was agitated..." (2 Peter 2:7). But he stayed because he was getting rich there. We can take from the city without investing in its spiritual future. Lot hid his light under a bowl. He was salt without saltiness, good for nothing except to be trampled under the foot of men.

2) Lot's family conformed to Sodom for its pleasure.

Lot was like a lot of businessmen. He sacrificed his family on the altar of his own career. While he was making a profit in Sodom, his family became addicted to the pleasures of Sodom. They conformed to Sodom's culture and lost their faith. When the angels warned them to leave, Lot's wife and girls didn't want to go. When the earth erupted in a massive earthquake, fire and gas gushed from below, reigning fire down on everyone. Lot's wife held back and was caught in the holocaust. She was covered with a shower of burning salt that was spewed from the earth. The salt quickly calcified on her body. It is a supreme irony that, because Lot refused to be salt in the city, his wife turned into a pillar of salt. Jesus said, "Remember Lot's wife." Hers is the fate of all those who make the *city of men* their refuge and hope.

3) Abraham cocooned himself from Sodom for his safety.

Hebrews 11:9 says, "By faith he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents..." He refused to live in the cities of the Canaanites for fear that they would contaminate his family. When he and his army of warriors rescued Sodom, the king of that city tried to reward him. But Abraham wouldn't even take a thing from Sodom, lest he be seduced by the city. It wasn't that he hated the Sodomites. When he heard that God was going to destroy that city, he prayed fervently for Sodom's salvation. That was more than Lot did. But Abraham took the approach of the Amish. We could take Abraham's approach and cocoon ourselves in an insulated world where we only hang out with Christians in Evangelical ghettos. But, Augustine is right: we must abide in the city as light and salt.

4) Jonah *condemned* Nineveh out of his anger.

You remember his story from our recent series on the book of Jonah. That Israeli prophet hated the capital city of the Assyrians for their violence and pagan corruption. For 600 years the kings of Nineveh had unleashed genocides on the nations of the Middle East. Three times they invaded Israel, butchered more than a million people, and took 250,000 Jews into captivity. Jonah had friends and family members whose lives had been destroyed by those invasions from Nineveh. He was happy to march around that city, shake his fist in their faces, and rail against them. But to his chagrin, they repented. Worse than that, God relented from pouring out his judgment on Nineveh. Jonah cries out in disgust in Jonah 4:2, "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God..." Did you feel like Jonah on November the 5th? Are you frustrated and angry at the way things are going in Washington DC? Are you already wishing the worst for our new president, before he even gets into office? Or are you praying the best for him--that he might rise up to be a godly leader? Sometimes righteous anger is necessary and proper. But condemnation is God's job, not Jonah's!

5) Jesus *confronted* Jerusalem with *compassion* through incarnational involvement

John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory; the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." Jesus didn't stay outside the city in a tent, like Abraham did. John says, "He became flesh." He became like one of us. He lived among us. I call that "incarnational involvement." John says, "He made his dwelling among us." The original language literally says, "He made his encampment in our midst." He pitched a tent in our city. He didn't build a house. He knew that he didn't belong to the city. He was just passing through on his way back to heaven. In the same way, we are just passing through. St. Paul says, "Our citizenship is in heaven." (Philippians 3:20) Unlike Lot, he was there to invest in the city. The city broke his heart, and he died on a cross for Jerusalem and every other city of man. He didn't conform to the city like Lot's family. John says that he came "full of truth." He stood against and confronted the culture. But he wasn't condemning like Jonah. John says that he also came "full of grace." He wept over the city. He embraced its pain. He comforted its people. He did all of that because John says, "He came from the Father." He came on a mission from heaven. And we have been sent on a mission from our Father in heaven. John says, "We beheld his glory." Jesus lit up the city with his truth and grace. And so we are called to light up our city with grace and truth. Like Jesus, we have no abiding city in this world, but we *will* abide in the city.

3. *The City of God* is the only hope for citizens of the cities of men.

St. John tells us that when God's Son became flesh and pitched his tent among men, they beheld the very glory of God. Jesus is saying in Matthew Five that through his disciples (the *city of God*) pitching their tents in the cities of men we can show something of that same glory. The cities of men are in desperate shape today. Even as Tom Brokaw and others push Evangelicals to the fringes, they do not see that the secularization of our culture is hastening its decline. Jesus is clear in Matthew 5:13-16. **The earth is in need of salt.** Salt has many uses. But in Jesus' day its most important function was preservation. There was no refrigeration. Without salt, meat decayed. Jesus is saying that the cities of men are in decay. America is decaying. More than ever it needs salt. We are that salt! Believe Jesus when he says that we followers of Christ are the most important people in America. **The earth is in need of light.** Darkness is descending. May God spare us from a new Dark Age like the one that descended on Europe after Rome's fall! On the other hand, may he comfort us with the historical truth that a new and better civilization came out of that darkness because Christian men and women went and lived among the barbarians of Europe! They were willing to invest themselves in the cities of darkness and decay. They became salt and light. Many were trampled underfoot by men. They paid the ultimate price by giving their lives for the cities of men. More than ever we need to grab hold of these two facts:

1) **Salt has to get out of the Salt Shaker and light from under the bowl**

Jesus couldn't be clearer: "You *are* the salt of the earth." "You *are* the light of the world. That's your identity. That's your reason for being on this earth and in this world. You can't lose your saltiness. You can't hide your light under a bowl. You are a city on a hill. At night, when that city is lit up, everyone sees that city. We can't disappear as Evangelicals. Rather, we must make our voices heard ever more. But even more importantly:

2) **The invisible God made visible through our good works**

We are the invisible city in the visible city, but we are never to remain invisible. Verse 16 puts it all together. We do good works in the cities of men. We do good things with good attitudes for those around us. It is then that they see the glory of God and praise him. Tom Brokaw, we aren't going away. And you and your children will be glad that we didn't.

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