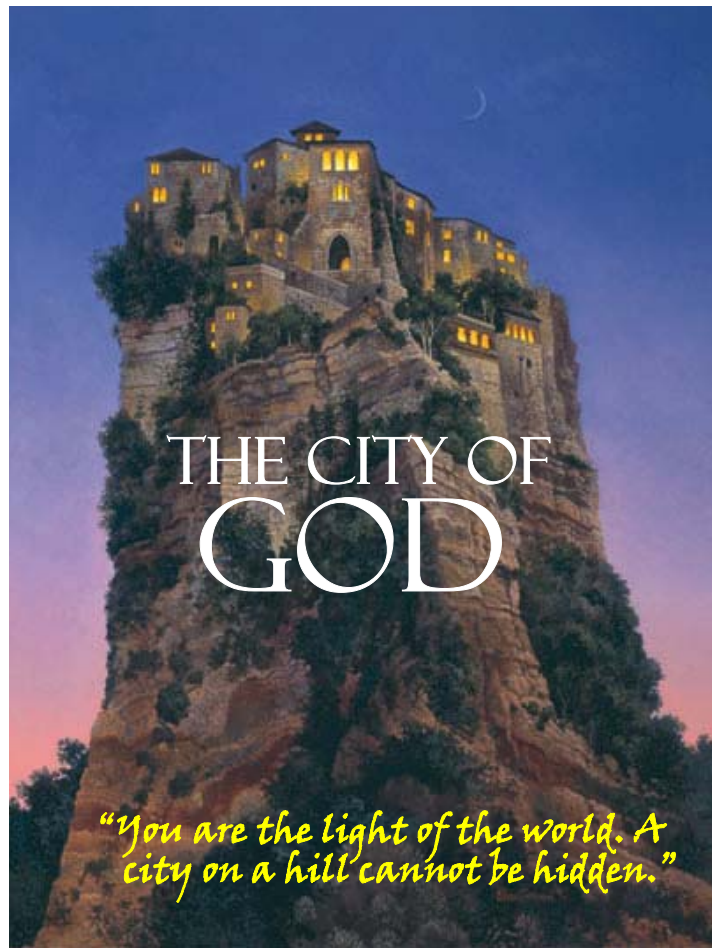


*The Covenant Pulpit*



**"A City on the Move"**

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Hidden on the Cuban *Isla de Pinos* is a prison so dark and remote that the world didn't know it existed. It was built in the 1930s during the regime of Fulgencio Batista. When asked why he built it so big, the dictator replied, "Don't worry. Somebody will come along who will manage to fill it up."

That somebody was Fidel Castro.

After the Communist takeover of Cuba, thousands of people disappeared in the dark of night. Most were transported to the *Isla de Pinos*. Among them was a young anti-Communist, Armando Valladares. Almost every night he listened in horror as prisoners were dragged before firing squads. Many of the condemned were pastors and priests. Just before they were shot, the silence of the night would be broken by their triumphant shouts:

*"Viva Cristo Rey!—Long Live Christ the King!"*

Then there would be an explosion of gunfire, followed by deathly quiet. But the silence would again be broken by inmates shouting back from their cells: *"Viva Cristo Rey!"* Eventually the condemned were gagged prior to their execution lest their victorious defiance infect the rest of the prisoners.

Though the Christians in that hellhole were mostly Catholics, Valladares remembers a Protestant prisoner who was called the Brother of Faith. He incessantly sang hymns and shouted to fellow prisoners to follow Christ to the end, especially as they were being led to their place of execution.

Valladares writes that one night prisoners were hauled from the cells, and guards began to beat them with rubber hoses and chains. Out of nowhere there appeared a skeletal figure with long white hair and blazing eyes. He opened his arms into a cross and cried out, "Forgive them, Lord, for they know not what they do." Before the Brother of Faith could finish, the Lieutenant fired off a round from his AK submachine gun. The burst of bullets almost severed his head like the blow of an ax. He died instantly.

Armando Valladares never forgot the Brother of the Faith or that small company of Christians who were light in the darkness and salt in the human decay of the Communist prison. After twenty-two years of enduring the grossest inhumanities, Valladares was released from the *Isla de Pinos* in 1993. Somehow he made his way to the United States and freedom.

You can read his story in his book *Against All Hope*. There is a wonderful irony in Valladares' memoirs. Although Castro ran the media, suppressed

religion, and imprisoned dissidents, he couldn't control the spirits of those he enslaved. Even in his darkest prison, he couldn't extinguish the light.

St. Augustine was right: there is a *City of God* within the cities of men; an invisible power in the visible world; a spiritual force in a secular state. Jesus calls it a *City on a Hill* that cannot be hidden. It is the light in the darkness and the salt in the decay. Though the systems of men like Fidel Castro crumble and fall, the *City of God* is indestructible. What is this *City of God*? Hebrews 11:10 calls it, "the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God." We who belong to Christ are that shining city on a hill. And this is the principle that St. Paul teaches us about the *City of God* today:

**We must never forget where we come from,  
where our *true* homeland lies,  
and which Sovereign we *ultimately* serve.**

On August 24, 410 Rome was sacked by barbarian Visigoths. It was the end of a civilization that had lasted 600 years. On that day Europe began her descent into the Dark Ages, and the world was never the same again.

When the word of Rome's fall reached North Africa, panicked Christians rushed to St. Augustine. In response to their fear and despair, he wrote one of history's greatest books: *The City of God*. He reminds believers of his day that they are first of all Christians, not Romans. Their security is not in cities erected by men, but in the city built by God. Their citizenship is in heaven. They cannot fall apart just because Rome has fallen apart.

Nor can they abandon what's left of Rome to the barbarians. They must remain in the cities of men. Like the Brother of the Faith in the *Isla de Pinos*, they are to bring light to the darkness. For a thousand years after it was written, outside the Bible the most read book in Europe was St. Augustine's *The City of God*. His vision inspired Christians to redeem the darkness and chaos left by Rome's fall. Monks copied Scriptures and books, and erected monasteries that became the centers of education. Priests and nuns built hospitals, universities, and cathedrals. Missionaries like St. Patrick and St. Francis of Assisi brought Christianity to barbarians and formed religious orders that changed the world. European Christians brought forth the greatest civilization in history from the rubble of Rome. The dream that is America was birthed out of their spiritual, moral and cultural renaissance.

Sixteen hundred years later, St. Augustine's vision is more relevant to us than tomorrow's headlines. Just as the barbarians were at the gates of Rome in 410, they are at ours in 2008. Our world stands on a precipice. Some argue

that we are descending into a new *Dark Ages*. In the United States we have just elected a new president. We stand at a critical crossroads. None of us can predict the future. But we know that, more than ever, we need to light the darkness. In his book *Against the Night*, Chuck Colson writes,

“The Roman citizens who watched their empire fall probably did so with shock and sad surprise, never knowing just how it all came about or how they themselves contributed to its collapse. Future archeologists poking in the marble rubble of Washington D.C. will likely say the same of us.”

Roman Catholic historian, Christopher Dawson, says that the church has been the soul of Western Civilization. He writes, “The church has provided the principle dynamic of change in the West when it has been most distinctly and unapologetically the church. Only when it transcends culture does it transform culture.” It is only when Christians see themselves as citizens of heaven that we become the salt and light of the earth. In his *City of God*, St. Augustine reminds us of Paul’s words in Philippians 3:20: “...You are citizens of heaven...” As citizens of the *City of God* one fact defines us:

### **The *City of God* is a colony in a foreign land.**

In Philippians 3:17-21, Paul speaks of two worlds in conflict. St. Augustine calls them two cities: *de civitate homi*—the city of man, and *de Civitate Dei*—the City of God. In verse 19 the Apostle says four things about the citizens of the cities of men: 1) “*Their destiny is destruction...*” The cities of men and their citizens will perish. 2) “*...their god is their stomach...*” The citizens of the cities of men live to satisfy sensual desires; 3) “*...their glory is in their shame...*” They revel in things that should cause them shame; and 4) “*...Their mind is on earthly things...*” If there is a heaven, it’s irrelevant. The here-and-now is what counts most. In these four statements, St. Paul describes the postmodern culture of America. He is describing the morality of the cities of men down throughout the ages. It’s no wonder that the average civilization in history lasts about 200 years before it collapses. St. Paul reminds us that we are different in verse 20: “*...But our citizenship is in heaven...*” He wants us to know three things about our citizenship:

#### **1) Our function: “the called out ones”**

When Paul says, “...our citizenship is in heaven...” he is speaking the language of *the colony* which was well-known to the Mediterranean culture of his day. When Alexander the Great conquered his world, he understood

what our military forces in Iraq and Afghanistan have learned the hard way: it is far easier to conquer nations than to govern them. But the Greeks had a solution. They built cities in the conquered territories. They populated those cities with Greek citizens who were chosen to immigrate to those foreign places because of their skills as artisans, architects, builders, tradesman, scholars, philosophers, and civic planners. They were plunked down in the middle of these nations with no other purpose than to *Hellenize* (or make Greek) the culture of the conquered people. The Greeks called their cities in foreign places the *colonias* (or colonies).

These colonies were known as the *Ecclesia* which is Greek for “the called-out ones.” The Greeks who were called to leave their native land and go as immigrants to a foreign country saw themselves as having a divine calling to make the world a better place by making it Greek. Do you remember the Greek father of the bride in the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*? He made us laugh because he believed that in every way everything Greek was better than anything else in the world. These “called out ones” (the *Ecclesia*) in ancient times had the same attitude.

They also called themselves the *presbeuoi*. That was the Greek word for ambassadors. The word *presbeuoi* literally means those who are on an errand or mission. These people of the *Ecclesia* saw themselves as ambassadors representing Greece. They were people on a mission, with a sense of urgency about radically transforming the culture of the lands they had been called to live in as foreigners.

Almost 400 years after Alexander the Great had conquered the world, Jesus stood looking at the city of Caesarea Philippi. Long ago it had been founded by the Greeks. It had originally been named *Paneas*. It had been built to honor the Greek god *Pan*. They filled the city with Greek immigrants (the *Ecclesia*—“the called-out ones”). This colony had come to transform Israel from the belief in One God to Greek polytheism. As Jesus stood outside Caesarea Philippi, he must have remembered the reason the Greeks had built that city, because he asks his disciples in Matthew 16: 15, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter replies in verse 16, “You are the son of the Living God.” In that place where the Greek *Ecclesia* had built a colony to turn the Jews into pagans, Peter the Jew still knew that there was only One true and living God—and Jesus was that God in the flesh!

And then Jesus responded with an amazing statement in Matthew 16:18, “I tell you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” Do you realize that this is the first time

that the word *church* is used in the New Testament? But in the original language Jesus doesn't use our word *church*. He says *Ecclesia*. Years later, Christians used *Ecclesia* to mean the church. From that word *Ecclesia* we get our word ecclesiastical. We have come to see the *Ecclesia* as nice, little churches with steeples sitting on street corners doing their religious thing.

But Jesus didn't see it that way. He saw the *Ecclesia* the way the Greeks and Romans did. King Jesus has come as the great conqueror to redeem the world at the cross and defeat forever the lords of the dark kingdoms of this world. And he has sent us as citizens of heaven to live as colonies in a foreign land. We are the *Ecclesia*—"the called out ones." We are the *City of God* sent to transform radically the cities of men. We come with urgency as the *presbeuoi* on a mission from God. We represent the King and Kingdom of heaven as ambassadors. Toward the end of his life, St. Paul wrote in Ephesians 6:20, "I am an ambassador in chains." He was a prisoner of conscience chained in the dungeon of Nero, the Emperor of Rome. But he never forgot that he was an ambassador of the King of kings sent to confront the petty king of a city called Rome that would one day crumble.

Jesus says in Matthew 16:18, "I will establish my *Ecclesia* and the gates of hell will not overcome it." Actually, a better translation would be, "...the gates of hell will not stand up to it." Jesus is saying that the *City of God* is on the offensive. We are moving against the cities of men whose architect and builder is the lord of hell. We will knock down those gates. We will transform the people of those cities as we, the "called out ones" work as architects, builders, schoolteachers, business people, moms and dads, students, and in a thousand other areas of culture to transform the place and people where we are called to live for our King and our heaven.

## **2) Our *Focus*: eternal not temporal**

In Philippians 3:19&20 St. Paul shows the stark contrast between the *City of God* and the cities of men: "Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. The citizens of the cities of men live for this earth, and this moment in time. Look at the postmodern culture of America today. We live for the pleasure of the moment. Look at the Federal bailouts. First it was the *Wall Street* bankers. Now it's the Detroit Auto Companies. Last week the mayors of America cities called on our President elect to bail out their failing cities. Which little piggy will line up at the trough of government *largesse*? But there is no thought for tomorrow. What will future generations do with the debt we leave them. History teaches us that the last phase in the death

throes of a dying civilization is government dependence. But the *Ecclesia* doesn't live for the moment. It knows that its citizenship is in heaven.

The Greek colonists understood that it would take years, and even generations, to transform a culture. They took the long view. They were about the process of changing the world forever. They transformed Rome, and Rome carried on the Greek culture as they established colonies called the *Civium Romanorum* (Cities of the Romans) across Europe, Africa, and Asia. It took centuries to build a Greco-Roman mindset, but 2500 years later the predominant cultural *forces* in our modern world were birthed from those ancient colonies. And for 2,000 years the *Ecclesia* that Jesus established has been built on the rock-solid faith of men and women like Peter. Today more than 2.5 billion people on planet earth name Jesus as their Lord and Savior. And one day, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of the One True God that the Greeks tried to stamp out at Caesarea Philippi. We cannot take the short view, or allow recent developments to take us off track or off message. Our citizenship is in heaven. We are part of an *Ecclesia* that cannot be defeated. The gates of hell *will* ultimately fall down and the *City of God* will triumph!

### **3) Our Future: the explosion of the Mono-Myth**

In verses 20&21 the Apostle Paul says this about our citizenship in heaven:

“And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ who, by the power who enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”

The ancient Greek colonists never lost sight of the fact that they were citizens of another land. They were only temporarily in that foreign place to change Greece culture to that land. They were committed to never falling prey to what later British colonists called “going native.” They believed that their Greek world-life view was superior to the culture of the place where they lived as foreigners. And these called-out people of the Greek *Ecclesia* never lost the dream of going back home to Greece.

In the same way, we who belong to the *City of God* (the *Ecclesia* of Christ) are only here for a short time as strangers on this earth. We are here only to bring the culture of heaven to earth. We must never “go native.” By that I mean that we are to transform the culture of the cities of men, not be transformed by them. In an age that says all moral and religious views are

equally valid, we must believe that the Word of God (and the life it calls us to live) is superior to every other view in the world. We will be accused of being fanatics, fundamentalists, cultural imperialists, far right whackos, intolerant, and every other unkind name that can be conjured up. But we must believe that the kingdom of heaven is superior to anything this world can offer. And we must believe that our Savior is coming again in power and glory to transform both us, and our world. Therefore, we will not give up the fight as the *Ecclesia* of King Jesus.

There is a mono-myth that is ingrained in our culture. It is part of our comic book and movie mythology. It goes like this: Gotham City is in the grip of a sinister and insidious evil. Its citizens are too powerless to stop this evil force. But to the rescue comes Superman, Batman, Iron Man, or Spiderman. The mono-myth is as old as the mythology of the ancient Greeks and Romans. It is part of the epic stories that have been passed down through the ages. The mono-myth is part of fairy tales we tell our children, and books full of heroes that we have read since we were kids. People have always longed for a Savior: one hero who would ride into town and clean up Dodge City. Unfortunately the mono-myth has become part of the psyche of American politics. We think that, if we elect the right president, he (or she) will come in and clean up Washington D.C. Right now the media is in the first flush of ecstasy that our new president will solve our problems. More than 70 percent of Americans, according to a poll last week, are convinced he will fix our economy.

I fervently pray and hope for the best for our President-Elect Obama. But I reject the mono-myth: that one man can be a Savior. This myth will cause billions to one day submit to the Anti-Christ. I know that it is not the one in the Great White House, but the One on the Great White Throne, who will save our world. St. Paul says that Jesus alone will transform everything. Until then, we live as strangers in this world on a mission, believing, as did the Brother of Faith in that Cuban hellhole, that we can be salt and light in the cities of men; the *Ecclesia* of heaven making an eternal difference by our lives. We must never forget where we come from, where our true homeland lies, and which Sovereign we ultimately serve. May what was said of the Early Christians in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century *Letter to Diognetus* be said of us today:

“They live in their countries, but only as aliens; they have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners...They busy themselves on earth...but their citizenship is in heaven.”

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