

Sermon preached at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church, Kingstowne, Virginia
on September 27, 1998, by Pastor Emeritus Dr. W. Graham Smith

John 14:6 and Mark 16:15

The words of Jesus:

“I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.”

“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

I'm sure I don't need to tell you that the Cross has always clashed with popular culture. Come with me to the year AD 410. The city of Rome lies majestically along the Tiber River. One morning when the citizens awake they have no idea that enemies are within their gates. During the night some warriors of Alaric the Goth had overpowered the Roman soldiers who were stationed at the Solarian Gate; and soon Alaric's hordes would overwhelm all opposition and be in complete control of the city. They spent three days trashing the place. They took gold and silver and priceless works of art. They loaded their carts and three days later they left. They didn't burn Rome or totally destroy the city; but they wanted to humiliate it and they did.

And the question that the citizens of Rome asked after the three days of horror were over and they reflected upon the tragedy that had overtaken them was this — “Who is to blame?” And most of the citizens of Rome said that it was the Christians who were to blame — their God was responsible for this. Rome was the city of Christendom, and God did not take care of His own city and His own people.

In order to understand why the Christians were blamed, we need to go back almost 100 years before that to the year AD 312. Constantine is coming to Rome to conquer it, and he sees a vision — “In this sign conquer” — and he assumes that the sign he sees is the Cross of Christ. So, he marches his men to the river, has them baptized as Christians, paints the Cross on their shields, proceeds to battle, and wins. Thanks to his famous and influential mother, Helena, who urged him to make Christianity the religion of the Empire, Constantine does, and by the next generation the whole Roman Empire is (quote) “Christianized.”

The pagans resented this. Some of them said: “We will continue to worship our own gods,” and they did. Others said, “If we have to worship the Christian God, at least we can keep some of our pagan practices.” And that's how a lot of paganism came into Christianity. Rome was pagan and polytheistic. If you were going on a journey, there was a god to whom you ought to pray for safety. If you were going to sell something, you prayed to another god that you might make a profitable sale. Well, Christianity couldn't absorb all those different gods, but they accepted the idea that saints might now take over those responsibilities! And so, many of the people who became “Christians” did so resentfully and only outwardly, and they were not genuinely converted. And now Rome had adopted this Christian god who did not defend them and the

pagans said: “Our gods could have done a better job.”

Now in order for us to understand what really happened, let’s put ourselves into the picture. Let us suppose that “The Religious Right” in America really got what they wanted — the criminalization of abortion, mandated school prayer, and the whole nine yards. Let us suppose that we had a Christian Congress, a distinctly Christian President, and judges and courts that gave Christian decisions. And then suppose that with all this in place, there would be an economic collapse. Banks would be closed. People would be laid off. Huge soup lines would be everywhere. Could you imagine what people would say? They would say: “You Christians, you are the ones who wanted to take over America, and the minute you take it over, here is this economic crisis. And you promised that if only you could have “America back,” then things would be different. Your God would bless this nation. And look what has happened, and it’s your fault!” Can’t you just hear them?! By the way, this has happened in our country. In 1857 a mighty spiritual revival swept across the land, followed by an economic collapse.

Now, in order to defend the Christian God, and in order to give some perspective to what happened in AD 410, Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in North Africa, who is generally recognized as the greatest thinker of Christian antiquity, wrote a book which is recognized as one of the most influential books of all time. It is entitled, The City of God, and in that book, Augustine said that in order to understand what had happened, we must see that there are two cities. There is “the city of man” and there is “the city of God.” “The city of man” is what men build, and it lives by man’s rules and standards. It is the buildings, the commerce, the material grandeur, the paintings, the sculptures, the sports, the drama, and the beauty that was Rome. That is “the city of man.” But there is another city, and it is called “the city of God,” built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. It is the city of all those whose trust is in Christ.

And, of course, because there are two cities, there are two different kinds of citizens. There were those who became angry when Rome was trashed because that was their life. They were materialistic and filled with greed. Lust and licentiousness, wealth and pomp and creature comforts represented all that they lived for, and when these were taken away, they thought that that which was most precious to them had been taken from them.

But then there were the Christians, and the Christians did not lose a whole lot when Rome was looted, because that was not where their heart was. They had treasure in heaven where moth and rust do not corrupt and where thieves do not break through and steal. And there was nothing that Alaric and his hordes of barbarians could do to touch what was particularly precious to them. It was secure.

Now I don’t need to tell you that there is in America today increasing antagonism between “the city of man” and “the city of God.” Consider the one subject that is consuming so much of the time, attention and energy of our nation today — a President in universal disgrace. I hope you pray for this pathetic man every day as Scripture commands us to do (I Timothy 2:1-4). I have to remember continually Paul’s words: “Love is never glad when others go wrong” (1 Corinthians 13:6, Moffatt Translation). Republicans, especially, need to take heed to these words.

But if the polls are to be believed, two out of every three Americans just want the whole sordid business to go away. Why? “It’s the economy, stupid! We’ve never had it so good. Get off his back and let him get on with the really important business of governing the country.”

Now that, my friends, is the voice of “the city of man” at its scintillating and disgusting worse.

“The city of man” in America is based on sinful human nature — “doing your own thing” — best summarized perhaps in the words of Woody Allen: “The heart wants what it wants; and whatever it wants, it should get.” And then, of course, it is based on the lie of Eden that basically you shall be your own god! That’s what Shirley MacLaine and the “new age” teaching tells us.

Now, folks, what do we do? What does America need at this critical hour? Or, what is our answer as we cast about seeing everything that we once counted dear, going down the drain? What is the answer?

Well, I want you to know that the Bible has the answer for us, as it always does. Indeed, most of the letters of the New Testament were written to little pockets of righteousness in the midst of a sea of paganism. The Christian Church today is not facing any challenge that it has not faced in the past.

Take your Bible and turn with me to Philippians 3:18-21. The apostle Paul is sitting in jail in Rome, and who do you think is the Roman emperor? It is the infamous Nero, the man who had his own mother murdered: the man who, when Rome burned, blamed it on the Christians, and he had pitch poured over them, and they were set afire and burned to a cinder. Nero was a diabolical despot, and we have not seen the likes of him in this country. And Paul in this passage is writing about the two different cities. And you will notice that in 3:20 he is speaking about the fact that our citizenship is in heaven — that’s the city of God. And very briefly five contrasts between the city of man and the city of God are outlined in these verses:

1. We walk in different directions. Verse 18 — “For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the Cross of Christ.” True believers walk toward the Cross: they submit to the Cross; they love it and glory in it. But those who are the enemies of Christ despise the Cross. Now Paul was not talking here about the pagans. He was talking about the Judaizers who were filled with legalism. Do you know that you don’t have to be a pagan to be an enemy of the Cross? All you need to do is to distort the Cross; add to the Cross; think that the Cross is not sufficient for salvation; and in other ways distort its message. By so doing you become an enemy of the Cross. Notice the contrast: Those of us who are in the city of God love the Cross; while those who are in the city of man despise the Cross.

2. We have different appetites. Verse 19 — “Their future is eternal loss, for their god is their appetite” (The Living Bible). They say, “Whatever desires I have in the body, I shall fulfill. Whatever I want to do, and whatever seems good in my sight, *I will do.*” They know nothing about the fact that there is “some food they don’t know about” (John 4:31, L.B.) and that “man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God” (Matthew 4:4). They do not understand that, because they are headed for eternal destruction.

3. We have a different language. Verse 19 again — “Whose glory is in their shame...” And what a commentary that is on some of the trash talk shows today — people, who should be embarrassed to let anybody know what they have done, gloat about it on national television. And the “city of man” people “set their mind on earthly things,” and that is all they want to talk about — houses, stocks and bonds, cars and boats and pleasure. And what about us “city of God” folk? We have a different language. “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matthew 12:34). We talk about the wonders of God and the glories of Christ. We love God, and we constantly confess our love for Him by our words and actions.

4. We live by different aspirations. Verse 20 — “For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” We want Him to return because we love Him. But what about those who are not ready for His return? That creates a conflict, indeed, and should spur us on to evangelistic fervor. And yet we are anxious to see Him as He is. And no matter how long His return may be delayed, there will still be those who are unprepared for that awesome event, because all that “the city of man” wants is more opportunity to gain pleasure, security, and freedom to pursue their own self-centered ambitions, regardless of what the future may hold.

5. We have a different destination. Verse 21 — “Christ will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like His glorious body...” That is our heavenly destination! And what about the end of those who know not God? Verse 19 — their end is “destruction.”

Augustine reminds us that in eternity past there was only “the city of God.” Because of the fall of man, now there is “the city of God” and “the city of man,” and we are citizens of both realms. And in the future, they will be separated again forever, one to everlasting bliss and the other to everlasting destruction.

But the challenge before you and me at this present moment is this: In modern America how shall the “city of God” live in the midst of “the city of man”? What do we *do*?

Do we withdraw? After the Scopes trial in 1925 fundamentalism virtually withdrew from culture. It had its Bible colleges, it preached its sermons largely to itself, and it had really no bridge to culture because the world was deemed to be evil, and the best way to separate yourself from the world is to be isolated from it.

However, that does not seem to be the problem today. There is another extreme that Christians are falling into, and that is to say, “Let’s do *this*: let’s *capture* the city of *man*! Let’s take it over! Let’s elect a Congress that is distinctively Christian, and then we will be in charge, and America will be great again. Maybe if we can capture the city of man we can turn it into a paradise.”

But let me tell you — history does not bear out the possibility of that being successful. Surely the one time when the city of man was captured by the city of God was during medieval times when even the political authorities were subject to the leaders of the Church. During that time, what happened? Some of God’s choicest believers got caught in the crossfire and ended up dying as “heretics.” Even Calvin in Geneva tried to establish a Christian enclave by forcing people to go to church and conform to his rules. But he didn’t pull it off because these kinds of superficial

changes do not change and transform the human heart. So, what do we do?

1. We choose the right battle. Let me ask you — What is the focus of the greatest battle in America today? Is it “family values,” or is it something much more fundamental? Is it political, moral, or social? I believe that the issue that is at stake is distinctly and uniquely spiritual. The greatest issue in America today is this — How do sinners get to God? Is Christ the only way or are there other options? That’s the number one issue that lies at the heart of what our debate as believers should be all about. Forget about whether the Earth’s fuel supply is going to run out; or whether global warming is as serious as we think; or whether we must bend all our energies to preserve the spotted owl; or who’s going to win the next election. All these issues are largely irrelevant when we are faced with the issue of which God is the right God, and how do sinners come into His presence to be received and saved? *That’s* the fundamental issue. And if there is good news for America today, it’s never going to come out of Washington, and you’ll never hear it on ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, or any other channel. But it will be proclaimed by the Christian Church when it is faithful to her Lord — the message that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, and that those who believe in Christ can be reconciled to the living and true God!

That’s our responsibility. The issue today is not political. The issue today as always is spiritual; and I honestly believe that the Church has largely lost its confidence in the ability of God to save sinners, especially big ones.

2. We use the right weapons. We have in America what is called “The Christian Coalition” — the “*Christian*” coalition. I’m not putting the organization down. I send them a contribution at least once a year. This “Christian” Coalition works with Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Mormons, Muslims, and anyone else who will join to get across “the Christian agenda.” “Conservative” Coalition would perhaps be a better term, but “*Christian*” Coalition?! Really! Now there may be some value in uniting, for certain political causes, with those who are believers in different religions and different gods. And, of course, politics is a game of numbers, and that’s the purpose of these coalitions — you have to outvote those whom you don’t want to have in office, and that’s the name of the game; but it’s a high stakes game, with all kinds of problems, and it has often backfired significantly.

Let me tell you something. If there is ever a cause in which we unite with those of other religions, no matter what may be said about that cause, it absolutely cannot be the main mission of the Christian Church. It’s got to be something else — something of lesser importance, because the paramount mission of the church is — “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel, telling people that Christ is the way, the truth and the life, and that no one comes to the Father except through Him.” And that is our mission and our mandate, and we must stick with those who agree with us, and unite with them. But we cannot even begin to think that we can make common cause with those who believe in different religions, and somehow still be fulfilling the *Christian* mandate. Impossible!

PBS did a presentation recently on “the religious right” in America. A news reporter working on it went to a scholar who would have some input on the subject, and this scholar said to this woman who had interviewed 40 people on the religious political right — “Did anyone explain

the Gospel to you?” And she said, “No, what is the Gospel?” And he explained the way of salvation to her — that Jesus died for sinners, and we can be reconciled to God because Christ met all of God’s requirements, and He is the only qualified Savior, and salvation must be a free gift, because if you understand the nature of who we are, and who God is, it can be no other way. She had never heard that before.

Tell me — has it really come to the point in America where a news reporter can interview 40 “Christian” politicians and not once hear the message of the Gospel of Christ? Could it well be that we are missing it by forgetting that our main mission is to exalt Christ? And could it be that why we cast about for one of these political solutions is because we sometimes think in the depths of our hearts that the Cross doesn’t really work any more?

Of course, there’s a place for political involvement. All good citizens should vote; and some Christians should run for office. But I’m very wary of any organization that says — “this is the Christian view, or this is the Christian party.”

We need to use the right weapon and that is the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Don’t fall for this slick one-liner which says that “that which *unites* us is greater than that which *separates* us.” Let me tell you this — when it comes to “justification by faith alone,” there is nothing that could possibly unite us with those who disagree with us on that point. And that which divides us on that issue is always much greater than that which could possibly unite us, because it is the very heart of what we believe to be most precious. The message of the Cross is the only message which is the power of God to save and transform human lives and human society.

2. We fight with the right attitude. We fight with humility. We don’t come to the political process thinking we have all the right answers, and that if we did what we think are all the right things, everything would come out nicely. I hope that you have the humility to admit that Martin Luther was right when he said, “I’d rather be governed by a wise Turk than by a stupid Christian.” And we’re not so foolish as to think that just because a Christian is in power that somehow that will reverse everything that is wrong with America. Never forget that it was a “born again” President who appointed some of the most liberal and iniquitous judges to the courts of this land; and their chilling decisions will plague our country well into the 21’s century. Of course, politics is important, but it is not America’s great hope.

We come with humility, and we come to serve. Yes, we stand outside abortion clinics, not to shout and rant and rave, but rather to minister to young women who think they have no other alternative. And when they choose to keep their babies, are we there to support them with that alternative?

Some of you say — “There are so many with whom I work who are completely hardened against the Gospel.” And the way that is broken down is by you and me living lives of integrity, humility, and service in the presence of the watching world. That is the way we impact culture.

When Paul wrote Philippians, there was not a single Christian on the Roman Senate where Nero ruled. There was no possibility of appealing for your “rights” as a Christian in the Roman Empire. No, the Christians got thrown to the lions. And yet, about them it was said that they

turned the world upside down (Acts 17:6). Why? Because of their unshakable confidence that they had a message that could explode in the life of the most wicked person, and transform him into someone who would love God, and whose life would be changed from the inside out.

Our problems in America are far too deep to think that they can be changed by a change of administrations in Washington. Certainly, we should vote for the best people who represent our Christian values, but at the end of the day America needs something much more drastic. What we need is a message that can come from men and women who are members of the city of God, reaching out in the arts, in sports, in our businesses, in our personal relationships, and in our families — reaching out to the city of man, and showing them the beauty, the love, the compassion, the wonder, and the transforming power of Christ.

And as a last word today — I urge those of you who are still members only of “the city of man” to listen to what Augustine said. He said, “Whatever men build, men will destroy.” Your social and economic infrastructures, your buildings, your retirement programs, your prestige — the whole nine yards will be destroyed. But only those who belong to “the city of God,” who have found refuge in Christ, who have seen the Cross in its beauty as the means and the instrument of death, but also as the means and the instrument of reconciliation and of life — it is only those who cling to Him who will be spared, because the city of man will disintegrate; and it is only those who know God who will live forever; for they have discovered a treasure that Alaric the Goth could never touch!

AMEN.

Epilogue

Our Father, we ask you today, in the name of Jesus, that you will help us understand that You have entrusted into our hands the most precious possession that we could ever own, and that is the message that changes people from the inside out: the message that takes hardened sinners and transforms them into people of integrity and compassion; that takes people who have been disenfranchised and bitter and changes them into people who love others because You love them.

We ask, Father, that you would help us to understand our role and our calling as redeemed Christians in the world — to take Your Cross and its message to a culture that is decaying.

And grant that, as a result of this message from Your Word, some in this congregation who yield allegiance only to the city of man, may enter into the city of God — through faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Jesus' name we pray.

AMEN.