

A Tale of Two Cities: The Book of Revelation and Urban Ministry Today

Dr. Justo L. González



Chicago, IL
Scupe Lecture
April 22, 1996

A Tale of Two Cities: The Book of Revelation and Urban Ministry Today

As I began to think about what to say to you today, at first I was quite at a loss as to what to say or do! I am a writer and a teacher. I am something of an historian. I am a little less of a theologian. I could even call myself an interpreter of Scripture. But an urban minister, in the usual meaning of the word, I am not. Thus, the question that first came to mind as I began to reflect on this occasion was, what can I as an historian, as an interpreter of Scripture, perhaps even as a theologian, bring to this assembly of people who are fully committed to urban ministry, and who are much more skilled than I in the actual practice of it?

As I began reflecting on this subject, the first thought that occurred to me was that the church was born and first developed precisely in the midst of an urban society. Luke tells us that Jesus was born in the time of Caesar Augustus. That means that he was born just at the time of the demise of the Roman Republic and the beginning of a new order.

Demographically, the policies of the Roman Empire were bringing about radical changes throughout the Mediterranean basin. The Romans

took from their Hellenistic predecessors the notion that human existence at its best is 'civilized' existence—that is, quite literally, 'citified' existence. The greatest invention of antiquity, from the point of view of both Greeks and Romans, was the city. When Aristotle described humans as 'political animals,' he did not mean merely, as we would today, that humans are by nature involved in politics; he also meant that the essence of the human is best seen in that highest of human creations, the polis, the city.¹

¹ J. L. González, *Faith and Wealth* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1990), p. 28.

What this meant was that Rome saw itself as the great city whose task it was to replicate itself in many other cities. This resulted in great population shifts. There are records of villages where the population declined to such a point that the entire village disappeared as peasants moved to the city, fled to the wilderness, or were forced to work for the great latifundia (large plantations) that were developing. There are also records of repeated decrees ordering those who had moved to the cities with no legal business there to return to the countryside. But such decrees were to no avail, and city governments increasingly found themselves forced to provide a dole to prevent riots among the growing and restless urban masses.

Every imperialistic thrust needs an ideology with which to justify itself. The ideology of Roman imperialism, by which it justified itself, was the building of cities. Rome was the great means civilizer, which the great “cityfier.” The very word “civilization,” by which most modern Western languages express the highest achievements of a culture, actually means the building of cities.

And builders of cities the Romans were. Where ancient cities already existed, they were rebuilt, embellished, often granted special privileges. Where there were no cities, the Romans built new ones. This was their great pride, so that when a famous orator from Smyrna visited Rome, and sought to praise her for her achievements, he said:

The coasts and interiors have been filled with cities, some newly founded, others increased under and by you. ... All localities full are of gymnasia, fountains, monumental approaches, temples, workshops, schools, and one can say that the civilized world, which had been sick from the beginning ... has been brought ... to a state of health.²

² Aelius Aristides, *Roman oration*, 94, 97. Translation by J.H. Oliver, *The Ruling Power: A Study of the Roman Empire in the Second Century after Christ through the Roman Oration of Aelius Aristides* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1953).

This supposed state of health which Aelius Aristides describes, however, was seen very differently from another perspective. In order to build cities, the countryside had to pay, and those who actually, physically, built the cities also had to pay. While wages remained fairly constant, taxes and inflation took an increasing toll on the rural poor, and led to an increase in the number of the urban poor. In Egypt, for instance, where a peasant's lot had never been easy, things were made much worse under Roman rule. The time soon came where the normal wages for a rural worker, 2 oboli a day, could only buy seven-tenths of a liter of unhulled wheat—enough to make a small loaf of bread—and out of that amount, that rural worker had to pay taxes of at least 135 oboli a year—roughly the equivalent of 67 days of work. The result was that masses moved to the city of Alexandria, where living conditions were horrible, but where at least there was the dole, and an occasional job to be had.

In other provinces the situation was no better. In Asia Minor, the Book of Revelation records a protest against such conditions. In Rev. 6:5-6 we read:

When he opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature call out, "Come!" I looked, and there was a black horse! Its rider held a pair of scales in his hand, and I heard what seemed to be a voice in the midst of the living creatures saying, "A quart of wheat for a day's pay, and three quarts of barley for a day's pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!"

These words require some further explanation. A year earlier, when the King of Pergamum bequeathed most of Asia Minor to the Roman Republic, the region was rich and prosperous. Its main exports were wools and dyestuffs, and its fertile lands grew sufficient wheat for all its population. Yet, as the region became integrated with the rest of the Empire, rich landlords

realized that acreage devoted to grapes and olives resulted in much greater income than the same acreage planted to grain. Slowly but inexorably, the land moved into the hands of a few rich owners, who devoted more and more of it to grapevines and olive trees. Grain became scarce and the province, though rich because of its exports of wine and olive oil, was poor in that there was not enough to eat. Cities such as Ephesus and Smyrna grew prodigiously, and built magnificent temples and theaters, but were also inundated by the poor who had been forced to leave the countryside and now had to seek out a living in a city that was built for the rich and the powerful who met in the forum to enjoy the city they said they had built.

In the year 92 A.D., just a few years before the writing of Revelation, Emperor Domitian issued a decree ordering that half the vineyards in the province be destroyed, precisely with the purpose of promoting grain production. But the landed aristocracy, most of whom lived in the city, raised such an outcry that the emperor rescinded his decree. The result was even greater scarcity of grain, and greater misery for the poor. The normal price of wheat was twelve quarts for a denarius; and barley, which was used mostly for animal feed and for humans only in times of economic difficulty, was supposed to be 24 quarts for a denarius. Thus, what the “living creature” in Rev. 6:6 says is a strong protest against an inflationary process that has made the price of wheat rise by 1200%, and the price of barley rise by 800%: “A quart of wheat for a day’s pay, and three quarts of barley for a day’s pay, but do not damage the olive oil and the wine!” Furthermore, the rider against whom the living creature raises such a challenge carries in his hands, not a bow like the first rider nor a sword like the second, but a pair of scales, symbol of

the trade that has made the landed aristocracy rich, and the poor classes even poorer, bringing a devastation comparable to war and to the warriors of the first two horses, who carry a bow and a sword.

It was not only the lower classes that saw the changes that were taking place and decried them. The Roman aristocracy also understood that great changes were taking place in the very fibre of society, and bemoaned them. Pliny the Elder, for instance, a contemporary of the Apostle Paul and a friend and companion of Emperor Vespasian, decried the growth of latifundia where slave labor was on the rise, and looked back to former times when the land was divided into smaller holdings cultivated by free citizens who were proud to work the land.³ And the words of Tacitus are well known, to the effect that Rome had become “a cesspool to which flows everything that is sordid and degrading from every corner of the earth.”

Even apart from such opinions, it is clear that one could say of mighty, resplendent Rome as well as of other cities such as Alexandria, Antioch, and Ephesus, that among their population were both the richest and the poorest persons of the Roman Empire. The richest, because cities were centers of power, trade, and finance. The poorest, because in spite of all that has been said from ancient times, the wealth of the rich does not “trickle down” to the poor. On the contrary, it is “sucked up” from the poor to the rich.

³ *Nat. hist.* 1.18.13,21.

Culturally, the changes and contrasts were no less dramatic. When the area was overrun by the Hellenistic and Roman empires, the ancient cultures and languages of Syria, Palestine, Egypt and other lands were pushed out to the countryside. But precisely at the beginning of the Christian era, with the influx of people into the cities, there is the emergence of several movements that have this in common: they are all new creations resulting from the filtering of the ancient, suppressed traditions of the East, through the overlay of Hellenistic culture. Among the movements that resulted out of this re-emergence of the world of the Eastern Mediterranean were Hellenistic Judaism, especially in the form of Alexandrian Jewish philosophy, Babylonian astrology and magic, the various mystery cults, gnosticism, and Christianity.

All this is not so different from the society in which we live. In our cities too, people from every cultural and ethnic background meet and mix. The United States was a multicultural society from the outset, for there were always Native Americans, and very soon there were other minorities whom the dominant majority either conquered (as in the case of Mexicans) or imported in order to benefit from their labor (as in the case of African slaves and Asian laborers). But in the fifty years since the Second World War things have changed drastically in two directions. First, the cities about which the poet sang, "thine alabaster cities gleam" now lead us rather to bemoan, "our disastrous cities scream." Second, immigration has rapidly accelerated. The result is that our cities have rapidly become both more multicultural, and more riddled with violence and poverty. And the more tragic result is that there are voices claiming

that the one is the result of the other, that if we got rid of all of these various minorities, if we closed the borders, if we insisted on English only, if somehow we managed to put the poor out to pasture, and made certain that our homeless cannot be seen, our cities would be clean, and prosperous, and peaceful.

At this point, one is reminded of the society of the Eastern Mediterranean at the time when the church was born. It too was a society in which people of different races and cultures met each other, but where many resented it and even legislated against it. We are all aware of the tensions between Gentile and Jew in Palestine, and even between Judean and Galilean. In North Africa, in and around the city of Carthage, there were clear lines separating Roman from Punic, and Punic from Numidian.⁴ Probably the area of the Roman Empire whose social life and interaction we know best is Egypt, where the abundance of papyrus and the dry climate have served to preserve documents whose counterparts have been lost elsewhere. In Alexandria, the lines separating Romans, Greeks, Jews, and native Egyptians from each other were strictly enforced, not only by custom, but also by Roman law, which according to one of the foremost students of the period amounted to an ancient form of apartheid.⁵ At approximately the same time of the ministry of Jesus, the Jews in Alexandria gained access to a number of privileges previously reserved for Romans and Greeks. The resentment was such that a few years later, in A.D. 38, there was a major massacre of Jews. Partially in response to such violence and discrimination, in Alexandria as well as in other cities, there were frequent riots of Jews and

⁴ W.H.C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952), has shown that this social division was an important factor in the Donatist schism and its aftermath.

⁵ Naphtali Lewis, *Life in Egypt under Roman Rule* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), especially pp. 32-35.

other minorities.

While the encounter of many cultures is intellectually enriching, there are those who resent it. As the old certainties provided by a fairly parochial worldview are challenged by the growing multicultural situation, and especially if living conditions deteriorate, many respond in fear and anger, just as many in the ancient Roman and Hellenistic aristocracies responded in fear and anger. In our society, since most of the positions of power and prestige are still held by people of Western European stock, people of other cultures and traditions find that they must constantly struggle for a place in the sun. The result is increased racial tension, often to the point of violence. Furthermore, today as in the first century, race and culture are closely connected with class and economic status. In ancient Carthage, those of Punic stock and culture were generally poorer than those of Roman origin; and the Numidians were far below both Romans and Punics. In Asia Minor, where the book of Revelation was written, those who were Roman citizens and spoke the languages of both Romans and Greeks were usually the richest as well as the most powerful and the most highly respected. Those who spoke Greek were generally considered fairly educated, but not always rich nor high in social standing. Jews were further down the scale. And at the very bottom were the original inhabitants of the area, who had been conquered time and again by successive waves of invaders. Thus, in Asia Minor in the first century, as well as in New York in the twentieth, when one spoke of languages, cultures, and races, one also spoke of economic and social standing.

Of all the possible texts in the New Testament to deal with the issue at hand—the church amidst the changes of an increasingly more urban and multicultural society—there is none that is explicit about the variety of peoples coming into the church, and specifically about the variety of their cultures, than the book of Revelation. Indeed, **seven** times do we find in the book, with slight variations, the theme of “every tribe and language and people and nation,” which shows that the book, although written from a semi-deserted island, was addressed to churches in cities where, as in our cities today, tribe and language and people and nation went hand in hand with freedom and power, and oppression, and hope, and despair, and class, and social standing.

The book of Revelation, however, does not idealize cultures and their variety, as many of us are wont to do today. Nor does it idealize the reasons for the growth of cities, and the poverty in them.

In this regard, consider Revelation 17. This is the vision of the great harlot “who is seated on many waters.” This is obviously an allusion to Jeremiah 51:13, where the prophet is speaking against Babylon: “You who live by mighty waters, rich in treasures, your end has come.” It is also a reference to a theme that appears repeatedly in ancient iconography, where a city is often depicted as a goddess enthroned by a river. The reason for this is that in ancient times most long distance transportation took place by water rather than by land. Thus, to depict the great harlot as “seated on many waters” was another way of saying that it was a rich city; a city to which, as in ancient Babylon, all the riches of the world flowed.

The angel explains the meaning of the vision to John: “The waters that you saw, where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages” (Rev. 17:15). In other words, that the great harlot is rich, but she is rich because she sits on all these various nations and cultures, exploiting them and having their wealth flow to her like many waters.

What do we learn from all of this for our theme, the church in today's urban and cosmopolitan society? We certainly learn that we must not romanticize culture and multiculturalism.

More importantly, we are reminded that culture always exists in a political and economic context. John of Patmos seems to be well aware of that: “The waters where the whore is seated, are peoples and multitudes and nations and languages.”

If we accept the most common interpretation, that the great harlot is the city of Rome and its imperial power, it follows that John of Patmos has a very realistic understanding of the wealth of Rome. Rome is wealthy, not because she is particularly productive, and certainly not because her people work harder than the many peoples, tribes, nations and languages she has subjected, but rather because she has devised a system whereby the wealth of all these nations flows to Rome, as so many rivers.

For Rome, as well as for the other major cities of the Empire, the first century was a time of great mixing of cultures. Some celebrated this fact, and others bemoaned it. But it was John of

Patmos who most clearly saw that the nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages were present in Rome, not simply out of cultural exchange, but also because Rome was the great harlot sitting on many waters, and the many waters were the “peoples, and multitudes, and nations, and languages” who actually produced the wealth that made the harlot great.

It is important for us to realize this, for the cultural encounters of our day do not take place in abstraction of economic and political systems. It is important for us to realize this, for otherwise we may become confused as to who and what is actually building the prosperity of the new cities that are suddenly appearing at the periphery of our older cities. In metropolitan Atlanta, where I live, there is a particular county that boasts that it is one of the fastest counties in the nation. They have refused to join the subway system, apparently out of fear that if the train came to their area, all those undesirables from the inner city would also come. Apparently, they think that their wealth is of their own creation, and has nothing to do with the poverty of the older city just a few miles away.

But John of Patmos says it differently: “The waters where she is seated, peoples and multitudes and nations and languages,” the many poor and exploited whose work and wealth serves to enrich those who then blame the poor for their poverty and for the violence in their midst.

A great Christian preacher of the fourth century, John Chrysostom, saw what John of Patmos had seen. He suggests that his readers imagine two cities, one holding only rich people and the other only poor. Place them both on an equal footing at the start and see which is better able to support itself. The city of the rich will have no one to do the traditional chores of the poor: no field laborers, no carpenters, no builders, no bakers, no smiths. The city of the poor will have none of the things traditionally associated with wealth: no gold, no silver, no jewels, no silk. Which of the two cities will fare better? When the time comes to raise food, which city will be able to do it? When the time comes to bake or to build or to weave, which city will be able to meet its needs?

What Chrysostom says sounds unbelievable: but I am seeing it right now in Metropolitan Atlanta, where the residents of that rich suburban county that did not want rapid transit are now having to provide buses to go downtown Atlanta and bring those “undesirables” they did not want, because without them they could not keep their housing developments and their fancy office buildings running. As John of Patmos clearly saw, the population that produces the wealth is not necessarily the wealthy, but rather the “peoples and multitudes and nations and languages,” on which the harlot sits.

When the rivers of wealth flow in one direction, it is only natural for the population to flow in the same direction. Let me give you an example. In the last twenty years, thousands and thousands of acres in Mexico have been turned from corn and beans and other such staples for

local consumption, to vegetables and flowers for export to the United States. As vegetables flow from Mexico across the border, growers north of the border find it difficult to compete, and must seek cheaper labor. That labor is then provided by Mexican workers, probably the same workers who until recently were growing beans in Mexico, but have now been displaced by export crops and are looking for work. Thus, while the newspapers carry all sorts of reports about people crossing illegally under the bridge, those people are in a sense following the tomatoes that are crossing legally over the bridge. Where the rivers of wealth flow, there too flow the rivers of population.

Or look at Great Britain and France, where there is now a strong backlash against all the immigrants who are coming to those countries from their former colonies. The Europeans may not like it; but the reason why such migrations are taking place, and precisely to those particular countries, is that those very countries previously colonized the lands from which those immigrants come. For decades, the colonial powers were enriched with the wealth of the world. Today, they should not be surprised by the resulting demographic shifts. Where the rivers of wealth flow, there too flow the rivers of population.

John of Patmos had it right. The multicultural urban society of the Roman Empire was not just the result of cultural exchange. The enormous wealth accumulated by the rich in Rome was not the result of cultural superiority. The poverty of the masses was not the result of idleness or lack of initiative. All of this was the result of economic exchange supported by political and

military might; by social structures that kept the poor in their place, and benefitted those who wrongly claimed that it was they who had built the great cities and the great civilizations.

At this point, allow me to change the subject radically, and try to explain why I think the book of Revelation is so important by telling you about my father-in-law, who died a few years ago. He was an avid reader of mystery stories. He had walls and walls of bookcases with nothing but mysteries. But we used to make fun of the way he read mystery stories. Whenever he got a new book, he would immediately turn to the last chapter, and read it. Then he would go back to the beginning, and see how the author got to the intended end.

It is a strange way to read a mystery. But, on second thought, that way of reading mystery stories has much to commend it. We tend to look at things from beginning to end; from past, to present, to future. If you want to understand something, you study the previous events that produced it.

What has made this view particularly prevalent in modern society is the success of the physical sciences. In the physical sciences, to “understand” something is to be able to explain its causes. And, when we today speak of “cause,” we mean what the ancients called “efficient cause.”

But that is not the only way to look at reality. In fact, throughout most of history most of humankind has believed that things are ultimately caused, not so much by other events as by a

purpose; not so much by their beginning, as by their end. This is what medieval philosophers called the “final cause,” or the “teleological cause.” Things happen, not merely because something happened before, but also and above all because they are being called from a future towards which they are moving. Thus, when medieval philosophers said that God was the ultimate “cause” of the universe, they meant not only that in the beginning God made all things and set them in motion, as a first efficient cause, but also that God calls all things from the future, as their final teleological cause.

We may find this difficult to understand, because to us “cause and effect” are a sequence that follows along chronological lines, always from the past, to the present, to the future. In this, modernity has been profoundly influenced by the practical success of the physical sciences, which are precisely sciences that study efficient causes.

But, when you stop to think about it, that is not really the way we live our lives. The reason why I came here was not only that an airplane brought me to Chicago. The reason is also that, when I was back home, I envisioned and wished for my presence here, and so bought a ticket, and got on a plane that then brought me here. And the reason is also that someone envisioned my presence here, and therefore extended an invitation. Thus, although in a way the cause of my being here is that I got on that plane, that is true only in a very limited way—as an efficient cause. In fact, the teleological cause is closer to the truth: I got on that plane because I was to be here today.

And so it is with all of us. When we leave our homes, we determine which way to turn on the basis of where we are going—in other words, the future is the cause of our decision.

Now let us think again about my father-in-law reading a mystery book, and beginning at the end. From the point of view of purely efficient causes, that is a crazy way to read a book. But it is probably much closer to the way the book was written. Most likely, the author decided the solution long before the first word of the book was ever written. The entire book, from cover to cover, makes clearer sense when you read the story, not simply as the result of dozens of separate events that unfold in chronological order, but rather as the result of that final event, which pulls all the rest to itself. If we read the book from page one to the last page, it is not until the last page that we find that the butler will turn out to be the murderer. But if we have a glimpse at that last page, as my father-in-law did, then as we read the book we understand things differently. When the phone rings on page fifty, we can have a glimpse of the meaning and purpose of that event in the mind of the author, in light of the fact that the butler will be the murderer.

In a way, that is also true about society and history. We can study society in all its details, limiting ourselves to efficient causes, and think we understand it. We can study historical events thoroughly according to their efficient causes, and we think we understand them. But that is like reading the book from page one, and coming to page fifty where the phone rings. We understand that the phone rings because someone called. But in truth, the reason why the

phone rings on page fifty is because on page 250 we are to be told that the butler is the murderer. Likewise, we do not really understand creation, or society, or history until we have a glimpse of the end for which creation was made, and the purpose towards which history and society are moving.

It is at this point that the book of Revelation is particularly helpful, and should serve as an example for our thinking. To speak of a changing society and the monstrous growth of cities was nothing new in the world into which the Christian church was born. And the early church did indeed have much to say about a changing society. But while Pliny and much of Roman aristocracy looked to the past as the ideal model of society, the early church looked to the future, and spoke of an even more radical change—a change so radical that it was best described as the Kingdom of God, or as a new city coming down from heaven: “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev. 32:1-2).

If the city of Rome claimed to be the great civilizer, the great citifier, John and those around him looked forward to a new city, not built by Rome—a city where, in contrast to the squalid conditions of the urban masses, “death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.”

Thus, contrary to what we would expect, and contrary to much of its later history, the church in the changing urban society of the first century, rather than simply bemoaning change, posited and announced even greater change.

In a radically changing society, where the city of Rome had set out to citify the world, and where this was creating enormous upheaval, the early church proclaimed a vision of an even more radical change, of “a new heaven and a new earth,” and a “holy city, the new Jerusalem.” In a world where languages, and cultures, and nations were clashing, where they were being exploited by the imperial power of Rome, where they were made to serve the powers of evil, the church proclaimed a vision of even greater cultural interchange, of an even greater sharing of power and prestige and authority, for the Lamb who was slain has ransomed from God “saints from every tribe and language and people and nation, and made them a kingdom of priests serving God and reigning on earth.”

Reading these passages, I feel as my father-in-law must have felt when he opened the last chapter of a mystery novel. Aha! The butler did it! So that is what it is all about! Aha! A kingdom of God, where God and the Lamb shall reign forever. A kingdom from all tribes, and peoples, and nations, and languages, where they shall all be a royal priesthood. A kingdom where they shall wear their white robes of victory, and wave palms of jubilation, celebrating the victory of the Lamb in a multitude of languages, for they are people from every tribe and nation. So that is what it is all about!

If that is what it is all about, the task of the church in a changing society is not simply to preserve the values of the past which are threatened with extinction, as the more conservative elements in this country seem to believe. Nor is it even to help people cope with the changes that are taking place, as the more liberal elements tell us. The task of the church is to proclaim an even greater change, to look at the present in the light of God's future, and to live as those who truly believe that this is the future from which God is pulling history and society.

There is no more important issue before the church today, than the question of the vision which guides our lives, the future for which we hope and out of which we live in. The vision of John of ardent Patmos is radical—so radical, that even the most revolutionaries pale in comparison.

There are alternative visions. There is a vision, according to which all peoples, and nations, and tribes, and languages must bow before the beast and worship it. There is the vision of the great harlot who sits upon many waters; and these waters are the many nations, and tribes, and languages, and peoples who bring their wealth to her. If we live by that vision, we shall be content with a world order in which many nations, and tribes, and peoples, and cultures have no other purpose in life but to enrich those who sit upon many waters. According to that vision, the nations, and peoples, and tribes can and should remain subjected, for that is their place in the scheme of things.

But that is not the vision of John at Patmos. According to that vision, out of these many nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages, out of these people who now inhabit our cities, and out of those people who have nowhere to inhabit in our cities, God will build a kingdom in which all have royal and priestly honor. According to that vision, a great multitude, from all different nations and cultures, from all races and classes, will jointly sing, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty.” According to that vision, our ministry in the city must involve love and justice, not just so that the poor and the discriminated against may feel at home among us, but also so that we may feel at home in God's future. *(evangelism?) Because, like John at Patmos, our eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; because we know and we believe that on that waking-up morning when the stars begin to fall, when we gather at the river where angel feet have trod, we shall all, from all nations, and tribes, and peoples, and languages, we shall all sing without ceasing: “Holy, holy, holy! All the saints adore thee, casting down our golden crowns before the glassy sea; cherubim and seraphim; Japanese and Swahili; black and brown and red and white, rich and poor and in between, falling down before thee, who wert, and art, and evermore shall be!”: Amen!