

## SHREVEPORT AT THE CROSSROADS

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Shreveport is a city in crisis. Although a litany of our woes is regularly recited in the public media, let me draw together some basic ingredients in our present predicament for your fresh consideration.

### I.

The State of Louisiana provides the larger context in which the struggle of Shreveport must be set. Here the story is one of disconnection, depletion, and deprivation. Caught in a fratricidal political conflict that cleaves the state into competing regions, Shreveport rules its corner in splendid isolation, still after all these years without the life-giving arteries of a North-South expressway or a Red River waterway. Once the crude oil capital of the state, Shreveport has seen its prime industry shift in the postwar years first to South Louisiana and then even farther away into the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. Dependent since the days of Huey Long on severance tax revenues from petroleum extraction to underwrite nearly half the state's budget; Louisiana has watched its known reserves decline throughout this decade, with experts ominously predicting that gas and oil wells could be pumped dry within five to fifteen years. Until major replacement revenues can be found from other sources, the prospect is bleak for any improvement in essential government services, such as education, which are now near the bottom nationally in per capita expenditures.<sup>1</sup>

Here at home, our city was tested recently in a national survey and its "quality of life" rated "substandard" (the lowest of five categories), ranking Shreveport seventieth among the eighty-three medium-sized metropolitan areas in America (population 200,000 to 500,000).<sup>2</sup> Immediately, even before the results of the study were available for careful scrutiny, our town fathers cried with appropriate indignation that we had been judged unfairly by a computer using obsolete data, and just as quickly the matter was forgotten. But once the report did arrive, its results turned out to be based not on fuzzy speculations but on 123 carefully weighted "quality-of-life" factors involving

economic, political, environmental, health-education, and social components. Nor is there any evidence that the results were skewed by using 1970 data which, because of the decennial national census, are the most adequate available. Doubtless Shreveport has made progress since the beginning of this decade, but there is no indication that it surpasses progress made by other cities with which we must be compared.

In fact, in one area the intervening years have been particularly unkind to our fair city, that of governmental leadership. We need no computer to tell us that the "quality of life" at City Hall has declined precipitously during this decade! In swift succession two members of our congregation were propelled into public service in the aftermath of emergencies that were not without embarrassment, while another heads a citizen's panel which has lodged stinging criticisms of shortsightedness in the prudent management of pension funds and other fiscal resources.<sup>3</sup> Brooding over all this confusion, unmentioned but not forgotten, looms the larger-than-life tragedy of George D'Artois. To be sure, the picture is not all dark, but any light which we can now see must be etched with a dimension of disgrace.

The upshot of it all is a subtle mood of attrition, a nagging hunch that our city is being diminished rather than enhanced. The sense of loss is all about us: our leaders are languid, our downtown is drooping, our spirits are sagging. Most of all, we mourn the exodus of our people. A recent article in Fortune depicted a map of the Sunbelt which showed that "every state in the region except Louisiana gained on balance from migration during the first half of the Seventies."<sup>4</sup> All of the parishes in Shreveport's Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area were colored as losers. Commented a local journalist after musing on that map: "The fact that the numbers are going somewhere else is symptomatic of a general recognition that something is wrong here."<sup>5</sup>

## II.

Does Christianity have anything to say to the plight of our city? Many of its most avid believers would answer strongly in the negative. To them, the Gospel deals almost exclusively with personal salvation and so is directed primarily to individuals and to their relations within the church. Any talk about God-and-City smacks of a now-discredited "Social Gospel" advocated by "liberals" in the early decades of this century. Better to leave such things to the politicians so as to keep the sacred and secular realms clearly distinct.

Despite the popularity of this view in a time of intense privatism, the plain fact is that it simply does not do justice to significant dimensions of our faith. The Bible is full of explicit teachings on the cities of its day. So vast are these Scriptural resources that we have time to select only the most important example, Jerusalem, as the illustration for our discussion.<sup>6</sup> The three great epochs in its destiny provide a typology by which to understand and evaluate any city, including Shreveport, in the light of the purposes of God.

The first significant phase in Jerusalem's history from a Biblical perspective was its choice to serve as a unifying center for the People of God (I Kings 11:13). A pagan city had long existed on the site (Judges 19:10-12) when David wrested it from the Jebusites (II Samuel 5:6-10; I Chronicles 11:4-9) and made it the capital of his kingdom. Lying between Israel and Judah, it belonged to none of the twelve tribes but was a common possession of them all. In subsequent centuries, as the Jews scattered in every direction, Jerusalem remained the one focal point to which their loyalties turned (e.g. Psalms 87, 122, 137). Because the one true God dwelt in His Temple there, it was to be supremely a city open to all of the authentic aspirations of the world, a beckoning mountain to which all peoples could flow in their quest for justice and peace (Isaiah 2:2-5; Micah 4:1-5).

Here we discover the foundations for a Biblical definition of what any true city should be. Pagan towns are tribal in character; as such, they are designed to protect and to prosper a particular race or clan. But because God is no local deity but a universal Lord, his cities bring together many tribes and nations, thereby fashioning strangers separated by birth and blood into fellow-citizens of one new community of mankind. Shreveport was once a pagan site like the Canaanite Jebus, inhabited by the Caddo Indian *tribe* and thus narrowly exclusive in character. But then came sojourners who had migrated from "Egyptian" bondage in Europe, possessed of a faith which made possible here a new kind of city, one open to pilgrims from every wilderness, alike only in the desire to order their common life by the dictates of justice and peace.

In the second phase of her Biblical history, however, Jerusalem faltered in fulfilling the God-given design. David's successor, Solomon, was lured into idolatry by his multiple marriages, thereby compromising the strength of the people's allegiance to one universal God. As the city reverted to

fragmenting competition between pagan cults, divine wrath was kindled (II Kings 23:26-27) which soon allowed the monarchy to be divided and then to be devastated by its enemies. Despite this painful lesson, which reduced Jerusalem to ruins for more than a generation (586-520 B. C.), the city was in danger of making the same fatal mistake during the ministry of Jesus. This time the idolatry came not from pagan neighbors but from an inward disposition to exclude the rest of the world (*i.e.* the "Gentiles") from their city by making God the Lord only of the Jewish race. When at last the Temple on Mount Zion became a fortress from which to kill outsiders, rather than "a house of prayer for all the nations" (Mark 11:17), divine wrath fell with such finality that Jerusalem forfeited its place as a city in the purposes of God (Matthew 23:37-38).

This grim chapter tells us that the same Lord who is the "builder and maker" of cities with foundations of faith (Hebrews 11:10) is also the judge and destroyer of cities that no longer welcome the sojourner from afar, that close their gates to a stranger such as Abraham who "went out not knowing where he was to go" (Hebrews 11:8). History is littered with the wreckage of once-proud cities that shut their doors to surprises, turning inward until they were suffocated by a self-imposed claustrophobia. Shreveport is not exempt from this fearful judgment. Jesus uttered woes against specific cities, Chorazin and Bethsaida, for their refusal to change in the face of a New Age dawning before their very eyes (Matthew 11:20-24; Luke 10:13-15), and He will do no less to Shreveport if we worship the idolatrous god of the status quo.

But judgment was not the last word for Jerusalem. Instead, it was the crucible in which tragedy was pounded into the substance of hope. Paul knew that if "the present Jerusalem" was in slavery, "the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother" (Galatians 4:26). Isaiah (1:26-27) and Ezekiel (40:1-48:35) anticipated the outlines of that archetypal city from afar. But the early Christians realized that they had already "come to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Hebrews 13:22). Even now, John of the Apocalypse could see "the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Revelation 21:2), and he described with unforgettable imagery the metropolis of his dreams (Revelation 21:1-22:5). As the Bible ends, the dialectic of urban failure and fulfillment reaches its ultimate expression, first with a terrifying dirge over fallen Babylon (Revelation 18:1-24),

symbolic of all the pagan cities of history, then with a celebration of that celestial city whose "gates shall *never be shut*" (Revelation 21:25) and whose architect is Him who declares, "Behold, I make all things *new*" (Revelation 21:5).

What this vivid language seeks to express is the conviction that cities, like the citizens within them, can also be redeemed! God intends to save persons both in their individuality and in their collectivity. Cities do not have to become enslaved by the strictures of their culture. They can choose to model themselves after the "Jerusalem above" and become truly "free cities" into which shall be brought "the glory and honor of the nations" (Revelation 21:26). Always there is the awful temptation to be like Babylon, proud and powerful on the outside but already condemned and dead on the inside. Shreveport could succumb and go the way of once-mighty Rome in the time of Augustine, or it could resolve to foreshadow that "City of God" which is our sure habitation in this world and in the world to come.<sup>7</sup>

### III.

Now that we have sketched a Biblical framework against which to measure the cities of man, we may ask what can be done to insure not just the survival but the spiritual vitality of Shreveport in the years to come. From the theological critique of Jerusalem just attempted, we see that the crucial issue is one of openness and freedom. Will Shreveport become a "tribal" town of closed groupings based on race and class and kin? Or will it summon the faith to rise above such idolatrous paganism by serving the one universal Lord who calls all nations and peoples to dwell together in justice and peace within the City of God?

In large measure the answer to that question will be determined by the quality of leadership which emerges to meet the present crisis. "Politics" is the art of fashioning an authentic "*polis*" (the Greek word for "city"), and that task must be entrusted in no small part to those fitted for it by training, resources, opportunity, and esteem. For its size, Shreveport has a splendid "Establishment" with more than enough education, wealth, leisure, and reputation to get the job done. But does this elite possess the requisite attitudes -- indeed, the sturdy faith -- to build a New Jerusalem on the banks of the Red River?

My misgivings come at the point of a classic French concept, *noblesse oblige*, which affirms that "nobility (or rank or station) imposes obligations". This is but a specialized application of the Biblical imperative, "To whom

much is given, of him will much be required" (Luke 12:48). Having paid close attention to this "gifted" group for nearly two years, I am afraid that too many within its number now follow the opposite philosophy that "rank confers privilege." Too many of our potential leaders who have enough money seem concerned only about how to make more of it! Jesus once called for a drastic reordering of priorities by asking what it would profit a man if he gained the whole world but lost his own soul (Matthew 16:26; Mark 8:36; Luke 9:25). We may address that wisdom to those among us with an inordinate itch for prosperity by asking, "What shall it profit a man if he makes money to spare but loses the city in which to enjoy it?"

The problem is not just that the names of our nobility seldom appear on the ballot. Very few are needed to run for public office, but those few who do need to be like the tip of an iceberg, undergirded by and representative of an informed and committed Establishment willing to forfeit voluntarily some of its fastidiousness and get its hands dirty building a better place to live. There is a rich literature on the city, of which the name Lewis Mumford is only suggestive,<sup>8</sup> that men who have memorized Dow-Jones averages and the Wall Street Journal by heart know nothing about. I suggest that the time has come for informal study groups to spring up in executive suites all over the city, for out-of-town business trips to include shop-talk with creative city planners, for dormant committees in civic clubs to be replaced by task forces that complete action projects; in short, for the talented people of this town to escalate the seriousness with which they contribute to the determination of its destiny.

My guess is that most have heard this plea to the Establishment in almost exclusively masculine terms, which is, in itself, a problem since fully half our citizenry belong to the opposite sex. The "model" of political responsibility for women in Shreveport is entirely too passive, too prim, too demure. Somewhere the tradition has arisen that the role of the male nobility is to make money and of the female nobility is to give parties. Surely there is no place on the face of the earth where ladies can dress up more elegantly and entertain more enchantingly than in Shreveport! Nor is this pasttime any less worthy than the pursuit of honest gain by the men. The issue, rather, is one of priorities and proportion. If officeholders think that half of their electorate are concerned only with social amenities, then all that they will do for them is drink an occasional cup of tea. But if they know

that these women are aware both of the political agenda and of their ability to influence it, if they are forcibly reminded that these women will both vote their convictions at the polls and urge others to do so, then an entirely new climate of expectations is created which significantly lifts the quality of their performance.

There is one point at which our male and female nobility collaborate to expend enormous resources of time and money, and that is in those recurring rituals by which the social pecking order is regulated and reaffirmed. Since these gala events have at times drawn the ire of Baptist preachers, usually because of their dancing and drinking, let me here indicate -- without applauding or condemning those practices -- that I think they serve a harmless and perhaps even useful function. Digby Baltzell<sup>9</sup> has argued that a clearly identified and institutionalized establishment is needed to provide stability in a time of excessive social upheaval, and he may be partly correct. My observation is, however, that the "first families" of Shreveport are already well known and that, except for minor adjustments to accommodate a very few, such as a new commanding general at Barksdale, their constituency seldom changes. It is not a little ironic that a power structure so static goes to such lengths to belabor what is already obvious to everyone. If this sort of thing could be cut in half, with equal energy and effort going into urban revitalization, I strongly suspect that everybody would be just as happy and that those needing social recognition would get all of it which they deserve.

Since, in the Bible Belt, the ministry occupies a special niche in the Establishment, let me conclude this critique of our local leadership with a look at the Shreveport clergy. Measured by depth of concern, height of vision, or breadth of involvement, both the Shreveport Ministerial Association and the Baptist Pastor-Staff Conference are disaster areas. With the exception of pitifully few, such as D. L. Dykes at First United Methodist, most ministers in this area have acted neither ecumenically, denominationally, or unilaterally to do anything significant about our city as a whole. It is not that we have tried and failed, which might be commendable enough; it is rather that we do not even have the real issues on our agenda! It is true that Baptists are often hesitant in this area because of the strong localism in their church polity. But we have scarcely begun to channel the contributions even of this individual congregation in building a better Shreveport.

I have concentrated here on the "movers and shapers" of our city because

of their heavy responsibility to provide leadership in the days just ahead. But all of us may rightly ask what we can do to meet the present malaise. I have two specific suggestions. First, work to overcome the excessive fragmentation which has compartmentalized our city into isolated enclaves. You have heard me call repeatedly this year for a metropolitan rather than a neighborhood outlook, but that commitment is hard in coming. Although our historic role as a First Baptist Church is to serve the entire area, just now we find ourselves rather cozily ensconced on the south slope of Mount Zion! But we cannot build a twenty-foot wall around South Highland-Pierremont-Spring Lake and call that our city. Instead, we must reach out and get deeply involved in what is happening to the North and West as well as at the center of our metropolis.

A second suggestion is to beware of the ideological trap which is being set as a result of our regional devotion to the word "conservatism." When that term is used to refer to the preservation of our most cherished values it is precious indeed and worthy of all acceptance. But when it becomes the codeword for a reactionary defense of the status quo it needs to be just as emphatically rejected as a misreading of reality. Cherished values do not change, but circumstances do, and we are simply sticking our heads in the sand not to recognize it. The Rodessa oil fields have changed. The Queensborough community has changed. The headquarters of Texas Eastern and United Gas have changed. We must build a Shreveport responsive to the realities not of yesterday but of tomorrow, and in so doing we dare not be impeded by a misplaced use of the term "conservatism."

Yes, Shreveport is at the crossroads, just as Jerusalem was on that day when Jesus looked down from the Mount of Olives, saw the Holy City in its true condition, and "wept over it" (Luke 19:41). He cared *that much*, not just for individuals but for a city! And when we learn His costly compassion, when His tears become our tears, there is hope for the redemption of our city.

Where cross the crowded ways of life,  
Where sound the cries of race and clan,  
Above the noise of selfish strife,  
We hear Thy voice, O Son of man!

In haunts of wretchedness and need,  
On shadowed thresholds dark with fears,



From paths where hide the lures of greed,  
We catch the vision of Thy tears.

O Master, from the mountain side,  
Make haste to heal the hearts of pain;  
Among these restless throngs abide;  
O tread the city's streets again,

Till sons of men shall learn Thy love  
And follow where Thy feet have trod;  
Till glorious from Thy heav'n above  
Shall come the city of our God.<sup>10</sup>