

Urban Ministry in the 21st Century



The Urbanity of the Bible

Rediscovering the Urban
Nature of the Bible

Sean Benesh

Series Editors: Kendi Howells Douglas & Stephen Burris

“Lilting would be the phrase that comes to mind for Sean’s style. Light reading, accessible, yet beneath it serious content that gives us an excellent comprehensive yet introductory biblical theology of urban mission. Its got the key paradigm shifts from mish-mash Christianity into fully engaged urban ministry—paradigms on which our life’s works and our personal survival at the coal-face depend.”

Viv Grigg, Ph.D.

International Director, Urban Leadership Foundation

“Christianity today is not conventionally viewed as an urban religion. The Hebrews were originally a pastoral people, and today’s Christian heartland in America is in small towns and suburbs. Sean Benesh explores the oft-overlooked urban dimension of the Bible, and how the Christian faith is lived out in the challenges of life that are most critical in cities. As we proceed through an era of rapid and profound global urbanization, this message is both timely and very relevant to today’s world.”

Aaron M. Renn

Manhattan Institute Senior Fellow

City Journal contributing editor

Author of *The Urban State of Mind* and *Killing Sin*

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Urban Loft Publishers | Portland, Oregon

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Series Preface

Urban Mission in the 21st Century is a series of monographs that addresses key issues facing those involved in urban ministry whether it be in the slums, squatter communities, *favelas*, or in immigrant neighborhoods. It is our goal to bring fresh ideas, a theological basis, and best practices in urban mission as we reflect on our changing urban world. The contributors to this series bring a wide-range of ideas, experiences, education, international perspectives, and insight into the study of the growing field of urban ministry. These contributions fall into four very general areas: 1—the biblical and theological basis for urban ministry; 2—best practices currently in use and anticipated in the future by urban scholar/activists who are living, working, and studying in the context of cities; 3—personal experiences and observations based on urban ministry as it is currently being practiced; and 4—a forward view toward where we are headed in the decades ahead in the expanding and developing field of urban mission. This series is intended for educators, graduate students, theologians, pastors, and serious students of urban ministry.

More than anything, these contributions are creative attempts to help Christians strategically and creatively think about how we can better reach our world that is now more urban than rural. We do not see theology and practice as separate and distinct. Rather, we see sound practice growing out of a healthy vibrant theology that seeks to understand God's world as it truly is as we move further into the twenty-first century. Contributors interact with the best scholarly literature available at the time of writing while making application to specific contexts in which they live and work.

Each book in the series is intended to be a thought-provoking work that represents the author's experience and perspective on urban ministry in a particular context. The editors have chosen those who bring this rich diversity of perspectives to this series. It is our hope and prayer that each book in this series will challenge, enrich, provoke, and cause the reader to dig deeper into subjects that bring the reader to a

deeper understanding of our urban world and the ministry the church is called to perform in that new world.

Dr. Kendi Howells Douglas and Stephen Burris,
Urban Mission in the 21st Century Series Co-Editors

Other books in the Urban Ministry for the 21st Century series include:

Crossroads of the Nations: Diaspora, Globalization, and Evangelism by
Jared Looney

Mind the Gap: Reflections from Luke's Gospel on the Divided City by Colin
Smith

Sowing Seeds of Change: Cultivating Transformation in the City by
Michael D. Crane

Acknowledgments

There are several people I would like to thank and acknowledge for their contributions to this book. First of all, Stephen Burris and Kendi Howells Douglas for inviting me to contribute to this new book series. I received an email from Stephen one summer right before I was headed out of town for a skateboarding event with my sons. That night as we were camping I sat in the car with a flashlight and journal and began drafting the outline of this book. Thank you both for your gracious invitation.

Next I'd like to thank Charlie Shaw who helped give me vital feedback to one of the chapters as I wrestled with how to better articulate the scope of salvation and the Gospel. I appreciate our times talking about God, church planting, and theology, especially as we're fixing up bicycles or riding the streets of Portland. Your contributions were incredibly helpful!

Last, I'd like to thank my family. Writing is time-intensive, and every morning for almost a year, while they slept, I'd leave before dawn for a coffee shop or the McDonald's across the street in order to write. I'd always be grateful to be home before they woke up. They are an incredible blessing to me.

Foreword

The writer of Hebrews pictures God as the builder and architect of the city that he has prepared for his people (Heb 11:10, 16)—God is the Urban Planner *par excellence*. The corresponding portrait of New Jerusalem is the culmination of God’s redemptive and creative work—a place of beauty, human flourishing, and joyous community where men and women eternally live in righteousness, justice, and peace with each other, as well as in worship, love, and obedience under the rule of their God and King; a place where God dwells forever with his people finally redeemed from sin and death; the place where the hopes and dreams of all creation are realized at last. This city is “the joy of the whole earth” (Ps 48:2). Through his urban planning and building activities, God himself has prepared the habitation, garden, and tabernacle that he always had in mind for us his creatures. It awaits those who seek God’s country—they will one day arrive at their destination and finally say, “We are home.”

As God’s image bearers, the children of Adam and Eve have been planning and building cities from the very beginning of the biblical story. Because of human sin and the resulting fall from shalom, however, the cities that we have built experience and promulgate corruption, unbelief, injustice, and death. On the other hand, because of God’s good urban plan, the city also gives refuge, nurtures creativity, enhances human flourishing, grants a more abundant life, and glorifies the divine Urban Planner after whose image we engage in city-building.

But I am getting ahead of the action. In the following pages, author Sean Benesh will be your able guide to this ages-old, ongoing story of the city. He will narrate the urban story of the Bible. He will make a convincing case that today’s astounding urbanization around the globe is part of the outworking of God’s urban mandate for his image bearers. He will connect the everyday work of the citizens for the common urban good to God’s desire to create an urban society that is just and compassionate, a city that is a refuge to those who are strangers

and aliens. He will argue that the *missio Dei* finds its context squarely within the divine urban design.

His voice is a welcome one. Christians in North America have long failed to see the city as a good place. Many joined the flight out of dirty, crime-ridden, impoverished, and impersonal gothams that they deemed irredeemable. Those who did choose to serve in cities thought of rescuing the city dwellers out of urban conditions. Missing was a biblical vision of God's good design for the city.

Now, in the early 21st century, the tide has turned on the public perception of the city. For young gentrifiers and hipsters moving into lofts in postindustrial neighborhoods, the city has become a desirable locale to live in. Churches, seeking to court them, have also moved into formerly struggling inner-city communities. But, often out of the newcomers' sight, former residents who were unable to join the former flight out of cities because of their socioeconomic standing are being displaced, making room for coffee shops and quirky eateries. Globalization and its attendant migration patterns have also brought floods of new immigrants from every corner of the world into the cities—endowing the urban communities transnational identities. Zooming out, we also note we have recently crossed a vital milestone; there are now more people living in the cities around the globe than there are people living in rural areas. We live in an urban world.

In the midst of these great urban transitions, we wonder whether God's people have developed a robust urban theology that will sufficiently shape and invigorate their witness among the nations in the city. There is much to catch up on and learn about how the Lord is moving his mission forward in our global, urban world, and how his church is called to witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in our new urban context. Sean Benesh will help us do just that. As a minister of the Gospel living, working, and learning in a rapidly transitioning community in Portland, Oregon, his is a unique vantage point to perceive the ongoing *missio Dei*. My prayer is that the Lord who has prepared a city for his people will use this book to edify and direct their conversation and ministry in the cities around the world today and into the future, until the culmination of history when we will at long last

reach the city that is the joy of the whole earth. May the urban communities of our day reflect more and more that city of joy, and may the church seek that city in our urban neighborhoods today with more and more of all that the Lord has given us, to God's glory.

Kyuboem Lee

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Preface

Refinement is an important discipline for me. According to one personality and strengths assessment tool, I am a refiner. One of the descriptors used to describe this attribute is that when I approach a project I like to “polish the rock until it becomes smooth.” That is exactly how I feel about this book in your hand. For me the “rock” began as *View From the Urban Loft* that I wrote in 2011 as I wrestled with setting forth a basic primer on developing a theology of the city. When I was invited to contribute to this book series on the topic of the urbanity of the Bible, I knew that what I started then would continue to be refined and polished. And it needs refinement.

Over the last several years as I have interacted with people who read *View From the Urban Loft* or who wrote reviews or posted thoughts about it, I was reminded again and again of the need to continue to polish this rock until it becomes smooth. I have realized concepts, ideas, and viewpoints that need further refinement and clarification. For the most part, I try to stay away from the bantering, name-calling, and backbiting that takes place online and in the social media world, particularly between the Neo-Reformed and the Neo-Anabaptists. I care little for such negative discourse, so I purposely attempt to stay vague on certain backburner theological points where I realize I am either offending or endearing one or both sides. I am under the impression that both sides are gifts to the church and demonstrate much needed differing postures toward the city.

The Urbanity of the Bible is another attempt for me to refine and polish the rock until it becomes smooth. In *View From the Urban Loft*, I asserted that developing a theology of the city is akin to hammering out a theology on the fly, especially in light of continued urbanization, international immigration, and densifying globalization. These forces are causing us to refine our theology *on* the city and dig deeper on theological reflection *about* the city. I am humbled and grateful for this opportunity. I also hope to rectify, refine, buttress, and expand on theological points I made previously. That means that what you hold in

your hand is a work in progress and will need a collective refinement process. I certainly have benefited over the years from building on the foundation that many others have made in recent history and throughout church history. Now you can go and do likewise.

Introduction

Most often theological discourse appears to be something that is reserved for the church. Meaning, theology is a conversation seemingly taking place in and among the church, by the church, and for the church. Rarely do we think of taking theology outside of the church. We assume the various positions and beliefs that we hold dear and that define us as a covenant people would be seen as absurd. Especially in a culture that is predominantly secular in worldview, we stand out in our assertion that life is both physical and spiritual and that we were created *imago Dei* for God's glory. We stand in many ways as a countercultural people living life under the reality of a God who loves, cares, and redeems.

A couple nights ago as I concluded my bedtime Bible-reading time with my boys, we entered into a long conversation about eternity. The boys were peppering me with questions and put me on the theological hot seat as I was attempting to rattle off answers as fast as they were firing questions. One of the points I tried to drive home about eternal life is that it gives us an ethic in how to live sacrificially today. We have this theological ethic of self-sacrifice because of our eschatology that drives us to live life now not for ourselves but for the good of others. We can knowingly and willingly give our lives away and not live for fame, pleasure, or accolades. You see, the 70, 80, 90 years we have here is only the beginning. Because we are a covenant people living for God, our theological framework actually determines how we live life in the here and now. Theology is not simply a conversation for the church, but it spills into all areas of our lives and into all areas and domains of life. This includes the city.

My life is surrounded by people whose lives revolve around making the city better—whether through research, consulting, creating, teaching, designing, planning, or implementing. This is the beauty of God's common grace, which emits an exquisite aroma as God's hand is all over shaping and reshaping the city. Most often these people care for and serve the city without a theological awareness of this common

grace or of God's sovereign hand guiding, prompting, and moving them along. The point is that theology, or in this case a theology of the city or a theological framework for understanding the city, is a conversation that can and needs to happen outside of the church and in the world. Theology is not only reserved for MDiv grads, pastors, and theology professors, but in fact has a direct bearing on the day-to-day lives of everyone. It is time to take theology into the city.

When I first started entering conversations with urban planners, transportation planners, traffic engineers, professors, and architects, I would often hide in my back pocket that I have been a pastor for many years. I wasn't ashamed, but I thought it would create obstacles or barriers for engaging in healthy dialogue about the city. I was wrong. In fact, I was way off. What I soon found was that my theological ethic or framework for my love and care for the city was actually more welcomed than I had ever imagined. People, though they may not agree with all the implications of my beliefs, still respect and appreciate what drives me to love, care, serve, and seek the welfare of the city (which includes Gospel proclamation and Gospel demonstration).

It is time to let our lights shine in the city, to be theologically aware, culturally sensitive, and passionately engaged in holistic renewal. God cares for urban people and urban places. This forms the basis of this book and why I spend as much time (or more) quoting, citing, and interacting with thinkers, writers, and works that are not theological in nature. . . . Or are they? I contend that I see God's handiwork all over in the form of common grace in the works and lives of those who are trying to make cities better places. We should be encouraged and emboldened to let our theology spill out of the church and into the streets, alleys, and sidewalks of the city. Will you join me?

Chapter 1

The Triune God and the City

As we enter the story of the Bible and thumb through the first few chapters, it is as though we are swept away on some National Geographic documentary about a setting, landscape, or epoch like the Jurassic period. As the scene unfolds in this computer-generated documentary, we watch from the vantage point of a helicopter soaring over pristine mountain ridges and through lush canyons. The imagery is laden with dense jungles, exotic wildlife, large colorful insects, and erupting volcanoes in the background. Our earliest recollections of the first account in Genesis conjure ideas like this or of a utopian existence with perfect year-round 70-degree temperatures or something like an extended beach holiday on the shores of Maui. The words “Bible” and “urban” seem out of place or odd, like putting ketchup on ice cream, spotting a polar bear in the Arizona desert, or still using a functioning 8-track player. But should they seem out of place?

“Urban” is seemingly the furthest from anyone’s mind or imagination in the first few chapters in Genesis. Maybe this is the reasoning behind so many people’s assumptions and assertions that the Bible is indeed a rural book and that we were not meant to live in cities. This then fuels the ideology behind many today who follow Christ yet fumble with the reality or existence of cities, God’s plan for them, and how we are to dwell in them. For many, our involuntary reaction toward cities is revulsion or even outright rejection. At best we have learned to

simply tolerate cities. We read the story of Eden in Genesis, then hold up that template to our current environment of global urbanization, and assume that something went horribly wrong. Maybe it had to do with the original sin in Genesis 3?

But is the Bible an urban book? Robert Linthicum (1991) favors the idea when he announces, “It comes as a surprise to all of us: the Bible is actually an urban book” (p. 21). After asking why we do not see it that way, he states, “It is simply because we approach the Bible from an essentially rural theological perspective. When we read the Bible, we are thinking ‘country’ instead of ‘city.’ We see what we read through ‘rural glasses’” (p. 21).

Somewhere along the continuum in church history arose the notion that cities are bad, evil, and a detriment to one’s faith.¹ Conversely, instead the wilderness is viewed as wholesome, good, pure, and the place where one can most intimately meet God.² Ironically, now more than half of the world’s population lives in cities and that percentage is well over 80% in North America. If Christians still believe that cities are evil, human-made, unnatural, and not of God, then as the 21st century progresses, there will be some serious issues to work through.

For many Christians, the city is an entity that is shrouded in darkness and the dwelling place of evil incarnate. It is in the mind of many that we live in the futuristic Los Angeles of the sci-fi movie *Blade Runner* or in the Gotham City of *Batman*. The vestiges of the industrial

¹ It is my contention that a negative view of the city developed during the Industrial Revolution. As the rural to urban migration exploded exponentially in the West, as the lure of new jobs enticed many to leave rural area, cities had a difficult time keeping up with growth. For many working class people, living conditions were crowded, deplorable, unsanitary, and unsavory. To learn more about a firsthand account of these conditions in mid-19th-century, see James Greenwood (1869) *The Seven Curses of London*. London: Victorian London. The city was seen as the source for the erosion of faith.

² This stands in stark contrast to the early church, which viewed the wilderness as the dwelling place of Satan.

city³ still linger and that cloud hangs low over cities today in the collective imagination of many Christians.⁴ There is no denying that the industrial city was plagued by dysgenic features while it was booming economically. “Amid these signs of progress, Industrialism also wrecked widespread social, moral, and environmental havoc” (Kotkin, 2006, p. 100). It was not only true for low-income workers, but even the wealthy were affected by the problematic attributes of the industrial-era city. “The new industrial cities were just as intolerably ugly, overcrowded, and unsanitary for the rich as for the poor” (Phillips, 2009, p.128).

Is that still true today?⁵ Particularly in North America? As recent as last week, I was in a large city with a group of church planters who, in essence, were competing with one another to gain the attention, approval, and support from numerous megachurch pastors who were visiting this city. The megachurch pastors from the American South were looking for potential partnerships to invest in financially and also with mission team support. While mission support is vital in the realm of church planting and urban ministry, the tactics employed by the local field representatives and missionary church planters were suspect.

Over and over throughout the two days all I heard was how dark this particular city was, as if God were vacationing elsewhere and not present. In a motif reminiscent of the bygone industrial-era city, the

³ While the Industrial Revolution took place between 1750 and 1850, it transformed the built environment of cities in the West. Toward the end of the 20th century, as the economy shifted from industrial to postindustrial (Fordist to post-Fordist), this too had and continues to affect the built environment of cities.

⁴ “If we think of the greatest writing on the industrial city in Europe and America in the nineteenth century it is to writers of fiction such as Charles Dickens, Edgar Allen Poe, Emile Zola, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Victor Hugo, George Gissing or Herman Melville that we turn to for inspiration. What all these writers share is a willingness to confront and explore the dark and desperate side of civilisation that is so palpably a feature of the overcrowded and sensorially overpowering industrial metropolis” (Parker, 2003, p. 28).

⁵ The answer is definitely “yes” in many cities globally, particularly in developing nations. A thought-provoking article that highlights the differences between slums and American cities is by Kendi Howells Douglas (2012). “Learning emit and etic through partnership in slums, or Confessions of a partnering, suburban, day-tripping, slum-dweller missiologist.” *New Urban World* 1(1), 29-42.

church planters hyped up the dysgenic features of this city.⁶ We would visit a certain part of the city, most often affluent and middle-class enclaves, whether urban or suburban, and what was mentioned was the overwhelming darkness of this district or neighborhood. Throughout these excursions, since I am familiar with that city, I kept thinking, “But what about *this* church over there, or *that* church there. Hey, don’t forget *that* ministry over there doing amazing things.” In fact, there are lots of other churches and great ministries in the area, but since they represented other denominations, networks, and organizations, somehow they didn’t count and were excluded. All that was focused on were inflated (or deflated) “churched versus unchurched” numbers or percentages, and how lost and dark this city was. If I lived there, I would be deeply offended because of all the signs of hope indicating God is clearly at work. It is all around. But when we hype up the negative features of cities, we are in a sense proclaiming that, “until we got here or unless we start this church or ministry, then nothing good is taking place here.”⁷

Is that true? First of all, whether we are talking about the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, the urban landscape of south-central Los Angeles, the sleek verticality of Dubai, or the desperate squatter communities of Manila and Addis Ababa, are we to view them all with an industrial city motif? Can we lump all cities together to broadly state they are dark, brooding, inequitable, unsanitary, harsh, and desperate? Are cities truly the detriment to one’s overall faith, and should they be shunned in favor of more pastoral (or suburban) settings? We can certainly make the claim that these attributes are alive and active in every city globally, but do we see them as solely problematic features to be remedied? Or

⁶ Note also that this is one of the most beautiful cities in the United States, both its urban form and surrounding natural areas. This city has a vibrant economy and consistently ranks in the top five in terms of the creative class and livability.

⁷ See chapter 4 of Brad Smith (2008) for a discourse about God’s prevenient grace.

does the presence of places like ghettos, slums, or squatter communities indicate something else? Signs of hope?⁸

What if instead cities were all part of God's redemptive plan? How would we respond if we discovered that all along throughout history that the trajectory of the *missio Dei* was and is urban, not rural? The ancient book of Genesis has been and continues to be viewed as the story of paradise that has been devastated. That what started off as an agrarian paradise has been upended, compromised, and ruined. Only if humanity could return to the bliss of the *Jurassic Park*-like lushness in the Garden of Eden before the fall, then all would be restored. Was and is that God's intention?

The Urban Trajectory of Creation: From Garden to City

This then raises points of contention and questions that will be explored in the remainder of this chapter. Do the early chapters in Genesis reveal God's intentions that humankind was destined to be an agrarian people? Are the events transpiring after the fall in Genesis 3 (then throughout the rest of the Bible as well) focused on transitioning humankind back to the Garden and life as they knew it before the Fall? In other words, does God's redemptive plan or *missio Dei* have a geographic focus on now extracting people out of the cities and relocating them back into the wilderness as part of the outworking of Christ's death, burial, and resurrection? While those questions may sound absurd, what are then the geographic implications of the *missio Dei*? If God's intention were for humanity to live an Edenic garden existence, then surely the redemption plan would include a restoration of the human race back to the rural hinterlands.

⁸ Harvard economist Edward Glaeser communicates that the presence of slums are signs that cities actually do work and that people move to cities in hopes of a better life. This does not diminish the reality of systemic sin and unhealthy conditions, but shows the overall trend that people move to the city because there is more hope there as well as potential to escape rural poverty. Glaeser (2011) writes, "Rio's slums are densely packed because life in a favela beats stultifying rural poverty. Rio has long offered more economic opportunity, public services, and fun than the desolate areas of Brazil's hinterlands" (p. 71).

I contend that it is not. Not only that, but I also assert that the trajectory of creation and the *missio Dei* (which will be covered more in future chapters) was, is, and continues to be urban in scope, focus, and nature. Meaning, whether original sin happened in Genesis 3 or not, it did not affect the urban trajectory of humankind. If our ancient grandparents, acting as the fountainheads of humanity, sinned or not, would we still find ourselves in cities today? Yes, we would. I continue to revisit this quote from Brad Smith (2008), “We are made by God to be city dwellers and we will have that blessing for eternity” (p. 15). What we then find in the recent history and process of urbanization is that this migration is not messing up God’s plan; in fact, that is the trajectory of creation and the *missio Dei*. Though the world is marred by sin, which plays out individually and systemically, it does not negate the urban trajectory of the *missio Dei*.

The basis of our urban existence is actually found in the triune nature of God and it begins in Genesis. “Though often separated by many scholars from the remaining narrative of the Old Testament, Genesis 1–11 is indispensable for the unveiling of the biblical worldview and recognition of the mission of God. These chapters disclose the setting and scope of God’s redemptive purpose and also help to establish the unity of biblical thought” (McAlister, 2012, p. 41). Genesis literally means “in the beginning,” which means that whatever takes place in this ancient book serves as the foundation and sets the trajectory for the rest of not only Scripture, but world history. It is essential to rediscover this trajectory. We read in Genesis 1:

Then God said, “Let *us* make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. God blessed them, and God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” (Gen 1:26-28)

One of the challenges of biblical hermeneutics is attempting to come to Scripture without bias or an agenda and having acknowledged our own cultural lenses or assumptions. While this is nearly impossible, what we can do is read and ask questions like we are uninitiated and unformed. If someone without any background or knowledge of Scripture began reading in Genesis 1, he or she would tick along well reading the unveiling of the creation story. There would certainly be questions regarding whether the story is literal or figurative, which depends upon their cultural background and worldview. With that said, I believe there would be a pause when this uninformed reader came across verse 26, “Let *us* make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.”

Us? Who is “us”? Wait, I thought God was only one being . . . so what does THAT mean? Obviously I am making assertions and assumptions to make a point, but I suggest that in verse 26 we catch a glimpse of the reality of what we know as the triune God. God is three-in-one (trinity or tri-unity) and “monolithic,”⁹ yet we can still comfortably claim that we are indeed monotheistic.

By the very nature of the term “us,” we find or assume multiple persons. Regarding the definition of the Trinity, theologian Wayne Grudem (1995) states, “The best explanation is that already in the first chapter of Genesis we have an indication of a plurality of persons in God himself. We are not told how many persons, and we have nothing approaching a complete doctrine of the Trinity, but it is implied that more than one person is involved” (p. 227). Not only that, but *us* reveals *community*. The triune God lives in community with himself. “We do not have to go far in the Bible to find a teaching about the nature of God as a community” (Bilezekian, 1997, p. 16). We are created in God’s image.

According to Dictionary.com, “community” can be defined in the following ways:

⁹ While the term is used to describe a large single upright block of stone, monolithic can also mean an organized whole that acts as a single unified powerful or influential force.

- a social group of any size whose members reside in a specific locality, share government, and often have a common cultural and historical heritage;
- a locality inhabited by such a group;
- a group of men or women leading a common life according to a rule. (“Community,” n.d.)

On a human level, we know that simply because three, four, or five people live in the same household together it does not automatically mean intimacy or relational harmony, but it does reveal community. This community or togetherness in proximity, whether in the Godhead or in a home, then assumes that the nature or space of these relationships is communal. “Communal” is defined as:

- used or shared in common by everyone in a group;
- of, by, or belonging to the people of a community; shared or participated in by the public;
- pertaining to a commune or a community. (“Communal,” n.d.)

In order for community to take place, there needs to be a communal element to it. Meaning, there is geographic proximity. The triune God living in community with himself as proximity means those relationships are communal (shared space), yet he is still one. Since God is triune, there is community based on proximity within himself. Eastern Orthodox scholar Vladimir Lossky (1997) notes, “The threefold number is not, as we commonly understand it, a quantity; when it relates to the indivisibly united divine hypostases, the ‘sum’ of which is always the unity, $3=1$, it expresses the ineffable order within the Godhead” (p. 48).

With God, we find that in perfection and wholeness. In our relationships with other people (family, friends, neighbors, etc.), we note that there are different levels or depths of community based upon many prevalent factors like openness in communication, intimacy,

harmony, shared values, shared space, and cordiality, to name a few.¹⁰ What we find in the very beginning with God is that by his nature he is a communal entity living in community with himself. Now that humankind is on the scene (Gen 1:26), that community extends out and flows from God to humans. Grudem (1995) expands on this, “If there is no Trinity, then there were no interpersonal relationships within the being of God before creation, and, without personal relationships, it is difficult to see how God could be genuinely personal or be without the need for a creation to relate to” (p. 247).

Cities as an Outflow of Community

God is relational and made us relational and thus we were created for community. The follow-up question is whether this community then necessitates cities. First of all, community necessitates proximity in the way mentioned above. It is rather difficult to be in community with others if we are living in a cabin on the flank of a distant mountain, miles from the nearest person. Gilbert Bilezekian (1997) even contends that the triune nature of God is not only revealed in the first chapter of Genesis, but it forms the foundation for all other communities in society. “Thus, one need go only three verses into the Bible to discover what is amply taught in the rest of Scripture, especially in the New Testament, that God is presented as a Tri-unity of divine entities existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the eternal community of oneness from whom all other communities derive life and meaning” (p. 17).

Sometimes we daydream about living in a remote cabin in the wilderness, away from the city and away from people. We create this

¹⁰ Groups such as NieuCommunities (www.nieucommunities.org) and the Parish Collective (www.parishcollective.org) are doing great work today re-envisioning how the church community can be more communal-based upon geographic proximity. “Live within a ten-minute walking distance from each other. Regularly share common meals and everyday life (some even choose to share homes). Regularly gather for worship and prayer. Are committed to live on mission in the local halfway homes, community centers, sports field, farmers’ markets, refugee populations, and so on. Regularly participate in intentional times of mentoring and coaching” (Huckins, 2012, p. 13).

utopian vision in our imaginations of cutting firewood outside as large snowflakes fall from the sky, sitting in front of the fire on a bearskin rug, reading classic books by firelight, drinking coffee, feeding tame squirrels on the front porch, and eating lots of meat. I actually have known people who made this dream a reality. However, they eventually found this utopian dream was more of a nightmare. In short spurts, the solitude was welcoming; but after awhile, it turned to loneliness and isolation. Soon they found themselves driving into town just to sit in a restaurant or cafe in order to simply talk with other people. They were desperate for connections. You see, we were created for community; in order for that to take place, there needs to be proximity. Bilezekian (1997) writes:

So, God actually created a being who was to reflect his own image. But, having done so, he astoundingly declared his creation to be “not good” because it was solitary: God was displeased with the fact that the man was alone (Gen 2:18). There was one solitary individual, but he had no oneness because there was no one else with whom he could be together in oneness (2:20). Since God is Trinity, he is plurality of oneness. Therefore, the creation in his image required the creation of a plurality of persons. God’s supreme achievement was not the creation of a solitary man, by the creation of human community. (p. 19)

Community is found in the communal. Not communal in the sense of us all living in a neo-hippie commune in the woods, but communal in the sense of proximity. God, being relational and living in community as Trinity, created humankind to be relational and live in community with him and one another. Community necessitates proximity—the foundation for the formation of cities. Timothy Keller (2012) expands on this idea of the relational nature of the Trinity:

While there is only one God, within God’s being there are three persons—who are all equally Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—who are all equally God and who have loved, adored, served, and enjoyed one another from all eternity. If God were un-impersonal, then he would have not known love until he created other beings. In that case, love and community would not have been essential to

his character; it would have emerged later. But God is triune, and therefore love, friendship, and community are intrinsic to him and at the heart of all reality. (p. 33)

Since we were created in the image of God, with one of the attributes being relational, does Genesis 1 have an urban trajectory within it? This is still before the Fall in Genesis 3. Does that then imply that our destinies were intended for cities and original sin does not alter the plan? I suggest that the mention of the first city in Genesis 4 is neither an anomaly nor a direct consequence of sin like many have purported throughout history. Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz (2001) note the urban trajectory of Genesis 1:28:

A perfect creation completed by God and unmarred by sin stood poised to begin its historical development. And in that setting God calls Adam and Eve and their future descendants to rule the earth and subdue it (Gen 1:28). This calling has been aptly termed the cultural mandate. But it could just as easily be called an urban mandate. It will be accomplished through more than farming or husbandry; the founding of the first city will be one of the first achievements of this enduring mandate to expand the borders of the garden (Gen 4:17). The future of humankind outside the garden was destined to play out in cities. (pp. 86–87)

It is out of community that the *missio Dei* flows. It begins and emanates from a communal God in and through his called out people with whom he is in communion and community.¹¹ Whether the called out nation of Israel in the Old Testament or the church in the New Testament, both are about relationships. God's presence was evident in the indwelling of the tabernacle and temple where it was felt, seen, and experienced. In the New Testament under the New Covenant, the church, the people of God, both Jews and Gentiles, are now the dwelling place of the indwelling God. God is both *with* us and *in* us.

“Let *us* make man in our own image, after our likeness” (Gen 1:28). From the beginning, the relational God created humankind. We are relational people. We were never created to function in isolation from

¹¹ See Genesis 12, John 20:21, and Matthew 28:18–20.

one another or from God. We were made by a God who lived in community who made us to live in community. This naturally leads to households, then villages, and yes, to cities. In his book *Who's Your City?*, Richard Florida (2009) highlights this natural inclination for us to not only gravitate toward cities, but desire higher-density parts like Chicago's Loop or Manhattan when he quotes economist Robert Lucas. "Lucas reminds us, land 'is always far cheaper outside cities than inside.' Why then did businesses and people not move en masse out to where costs are substantially lower? Lucas answered his question with another, equally simple observation: 'What can people be paying Manhattan or downtown Chicago rents for, if not to be around other people?'" (p. 61).

I contend that our destinies were not to solely be an agrarian people living a rural existence. Instead, God's triune nature was and is relational, and being made in the *imago Dei*, we are relational beings as well. If the Fall in Genesis 3 upended our rural existence, then we might assume that at the consummation of all things at the end of time we would return to this idyllic setting. Instead, as Scot McKnight (2011) shows, we have a different eternal destiny. "God originally placed Adam and Eve in a garden-temple, but when God gets things wrapped up, the garden disappears. Instead of a garden in Revelation 21–22, we find a *city*. The garden, in other words, is not the ideal condition. The ideal condition is a flourishing, vibrant, culture-seeking, God-honoring, Jesus-centered city" (p. 36). Glaeser (2011) echoes McKnight: "On a planet with vast amounts of space (all of humanity could fit in Texas—each with a personal townhouse), we choose cities" (p. 1).

When the apostle Paul addressed the Athenians on the Areopagus in Acts 17, he paints the picture of a sovereign God who helped form and shape the urbanization process up to that point in human history:

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in

it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us.” (Acts 17:22–27)

While this is only a selected passage in Scripture, it gives credence as well as an interpretive template for what was transpiring in Genesis 1. Paul reveals that national expansion as well as the urbanization process was indeed brought on by the hand of God. We are not privy to all of the nuances or details, but in an overarching manner, we can comfortably acknowledge God’s hand in the process throughout history, up to the present, and then beyond. “The boundaries of the places where they would live” (Acts 17:26) were established by God. Therefore, as we watch cities swell under the weight of rural-to-urban migration, international immigration, and the processes of globalization, we can conclude that God has set our urban trajectory.

In the beginning was the triune God who was in community with himself in the Godhead. As humans were created in the image of God, we were made relational beings to enjoy community with not only God, but with one another. This then is the foundation for the urban trajectory of humanity as well as Scripture. We were meant to live in cities. “The making of community was reason enough for creation. But if community is God’s highest aim, it deserves to be expanded” (Bilezekian, 1997, p. 25).

Chapter 2

From Garden to City: The Beginning of the Rural-Urban Migration

Children are an extension of who we are, both good and bad. We impart our strengths, weaknesses, worldviews, passions, blind spots, and even idiosyncrasies to them through the osmosis of parenting. Every now and then, they will say something, act in a certain way, or display a mannerism that gives us pause . . . and then often laughter. Our children are a reflection of who we are and what we value.

My wife and I have three sons who have had their formative years growing up in the city. Not only do they love and embrace such things as diversity and multiculturalism, but they also prefer other urban attributes and features like high-density cities, public mass transit, and walkability. After moving to inner-city Portland from one of the most multicultural neighborhoods in Canada, it was a culture shock for our sons. They had been used to being the minority and one of the only kids in their classes who were actually born in North America. Shortly after arriving in Portland, our oldest son pulled me aside and said, “Dad, Portland is way too white.” As a family we love and value all things urban and a cacophony of cultures.

We have taught our sons about the city, the values of urban life, and how to live and function in the city. They are at home here, whether riding alone on the MAX light rail train, taking buses, or skateboarding around the neighborhood. Our sons were born in the city and grew up

in the city. Not so with me and my wife. In fact, I grew up in small-town Iowa and she on a farm. For them, there was no migration to the city, but for me and my wife we not only migrated to the city, but had to learn and acquire a whole different framework and set of skills. Navigating the city did not come naturally, and we had to work hard at it, whereas for our sons it is akin to breathing, involuntary and natural. Now collectively as a family we call the city home and are quite comfortable here. The bigger the city, the better. Whether I am walking the streets of Shanghai, San Francisco, or Montréal, I feel alive in the city and can breathe easily.

There is a sensitivity felt within in terms of the rural-to-urban migration that is noticeable in global cities today. This process is more than the small-town kid moving to the big city, but it is part of a larger phenomenon that is affecting all of humanity. People are moving to the city en masse. Some do so out of desperation, to escape rural poverty. For others, it is for better-paying jobs and to move up the corporate ladder. This pace is felt more acutely in developing nations than developed nations, but nonetheless it continues to reorient us. We are more than *Homo sapiens*; we can more accurately be described as *Homo urbanus*.

Urbanization / City Expansion

The process of urbanization has been around since the formation of the first cities, although cities of today stand in stark contrast. “The modern metropolis is a huge and intricate machine, a three-dimensional network of houses, skyscrapers, highways, parks, and power grids” (Abbot, 2007, p.1). The term itself (urbanization) is used frequently today in books, journals, and lectures, yet surprisingly it is a misunderstood word. There are two related movements shaping cities: urbanization and the growth of cities. Although they are related they are not the same.

Urbanization refers to population concentration. The term typically refers to the proportion of the total population in a society or

nation living in urban settlements. It can also refer to a rise in the proportion of urban residents within a society or nation. Finally, urbanization may also refer to the process of becoming urban in terms of social, technological, political, and spatial organization.

Urbanization should not be confused with city growth. Urbanization refers to the proportion of an entire society's or nation's population living in urban or metropolitan places. So, it is quite possible for cities to increase in population enormously without urbanization taking place. This can occur if the rural population grows as rapidly as, or more rapidly than, the urban population. (Philips, 2009, pp. 148-149)

In many developing nations of the Majority World, the process of urbanization is moving at a rapid pace as people move to cities in droves. In countries like the United States, while the pace of urbanization has significantly slowed, cities are still growing. "A total of 193,107 new city dwellers are added to the world's urban population daily. This translates to 5 million new urban dwellers per month in the developing world and 500,000 in developed countries" (UN-HABITAT, 2009, p. 26). Most often, the motivation in developing countries is to escape rural poverty in hopes of finding jobs of any kind in the city. We found this similar process in the Industrial Revolution as people flocked to cities in Western Europe, the United States, and Canada for jobs. With such rapid rural-to-urban migration, cities were exploding at the seams and, as mentioned in the previous chapter, living conditions were deplorable because the urban infrastructure could not keep up. We find this a current reality of cities such as Manila, Addis Ababa, and Mumbai to name a few. "A key problem is that most of the rapid urban growth is taking place in countries least able to cope—in terms of the ability of governments to provide, or facilitate the provision of, urban infrastructure; in terms of the ability of urban residents to pay for such service; and in terms of resilience to natural disasters. The inevitable result has been the rapid growth of urban slums and squatter settlements" (UN-HABITAT, 2009, p.xxii).

In regards to the formation of urban nations or urban societies, this is a relatively recent phenomenon. "It was not until about the turn of

the twentieth century that the first urbanized society came into existence: Great Britain. It became the first society in history whose urban population exceeded its rural population” (Philips, 2009, p. 148). Internationally recognized sociologist and demographer of the 20th century, Kingsley Davis (2011), writes, “Urbanized societies, in which a majority of the people live crowded together in towns and cities, represent a new and fundamental step in man’s social evolution” (p. 22). This process of rapid urbanization stemming from the Industrial Revolution began altering the urban landscape that we find ourselves in today in the 21st century. As Jeb Brugmann (2009) states, “Nothing matches the sheer numbers, momentum, and universality of the Great Migration to cities that began in eighteenth-century Europe and accelerated exponentially into a global phenomenon in the twentieth century” (p. 39).

Cities have been growing since their early beginnings, whether through elevated birth rates, rural-to-urban migration, or international immigration. It is changing everything. “All-out urbanization is fundamentally changing the condition of humanity and our relationship to the Earth. We humans have been undergoing a staggering transformation: from living in a world of farms, villages, and small towns, we are changing ourselves into an urban species” (Girardet, 2008, pp. 4–5). What are the roots of this urbanization process? If cities have been around for millennia, why has it taken so long to finally have urban societies? Urbanization is not simply a concept or movement found outside of Scripture, as Andrew Davey (2002) contends, “Urbanization is a biblical reality” (p. 59).

The Beginning of the Rural-Urban Migration

Whether I am sitting in a seminary or a public university, when it comes to the formation of the first cities in antiquity there is a consensus: *cities all of a sudden appeared*. In the study of ancient cities, there is a remarkable transformation that took place in the present-day Middle East. Seemingly out of nowhere, cities appeared. No precursors, no lead-ups, no expansions of then-contemporary villages, but simply

that cities erupted onto the scene. Urbanologist E. Barbara Phillips (2009), in reference to the formation of ancient cities, writes, “Controversy and tentative knowledge thus typify scholarly discussions of the earliest cities” (p. 105). Later on she asks, “Why did people originally form cities? What features do the varied cities invented and sustained by human beings have in common? Why did cities grow and prosper in certain historical periods? What roles do technology, social organization, physical environment, and population play in city growth?” (p. 106).

Biblical history does little to clarify the origins of cities. In fact, the details are nebulous, and there is debate in regards to the first cities as well as the motives behind their formation. “Despite the statements about the first cities that we find in the early part of Genesis, the chapters that concern origins and prehistory can offer us no insight into the origin of urban life” (Davey, 2002, p. 61). While partially agreeing with that statement, I contend that there are indeed some insights we can draw from in regards to the origins of urban life, though the details are hazy. In the first chapter, I argued that cities are a natural outflow of the triune God who made humanity in his image. We were created for community. Add to that the scope of Genesis 1:28, which has been dubbed “the urban mandate” (Conn & Ortiz, 2001, p. 87) and gives rise to the idea that cities were part of God’s plan from the beginning. “A city is a social form in which people physically live in close proximity to one another” (Keller, 2012, p. 135). We were never meant to solely dwell in the Garden of Eden, but the trajectory of humanity was destined to play out in cities. This was all set in place before Adam and Eve sinned in Genesis 3.

Did God have an urban intention from the beginning? How did the Fall in Genesis 3 affect that?

In keeping with this urban intention of God, Genesis images of the garden elsewhere in Scripture become urban images. The river that waters the garden (Gen 2:10) is pictured in Psalm 46:5 as watering “the city of God.” Zechariah combines the Edenic features of the river and life into “living waters” that go out from Jerusalem (Zech. 14:9). And preeminently the Eden allusions reappear in the

New Jerusalem of Revelation, “the holy city coming down out of heaven from God” (Rev, 21:2). In this shrine city there is no temple as of old; the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (Rev. 21:22). Eden’s river is there, its banks now lined with multiple trees of life “for the healing of the nations” (Rev. 22:1–2). (Conn & Ortiz, 2001, p. 87)

Conn and Ortiz (2001) insightfully ask, “Did the fall of Adam and Eve change this positive perception of the city or God’s concern for the city” (p. 87).

In some of my previous books, I have spent time exploring and reflecting on Genesis 4 in regards to the formation of the first city as found in Scripture.¹ My intention in this chapter is to continue to push the conversation forward, especially in light of the first chapter of this book and the urban mandate that was set in the Garden, which flowed out of the nature of the triune God and making humanity in the *imago Dei*. The pinnacle of God’s creation was indeed humanity. Part of being made in the image of God means that God also endowed us with the ability to create and be creative. “Humankind’s greatest creation has always been its cities” (Kotkin, 2006, p. xx). Does the text of Genesis 4 and the example of ancient cities in the Near East reveal this?

In Genesis 4, we find the first mention of a city in the Bible, Enoch. “Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch” (Gen 4:17). The reason behind this topic being such a flashpoint of controversy revolves around the circumstances leading up to this formation of a city. The story before Cain’s construction of Enoch involves his murder of his brother Abel (Gen 4:8), successive banishment from agricultural life (Gen 4:11–12), exile as a wandering fugitive (Gen 4:12), fearing for his own life (Gen 4:14), and leaving the presence of the Lord by moving east of Eden to Nod (Gen 4:16). All of these disparaging events took

¹ In Chapter 2 “Biblical Foundations” of *Metrospiritual: The Geography of Church Planting*, I began looking at the formation of Enoch and offered some theological reflection. In Chapter 5 “Origins” of *View From the Urban Loft: Developing a Theological Framework for Understanding the City*, I expanded on the initial development in *Metrospiritual* and dug deeper.

place immediately before the construction of the first city mentioned in Scripture.

The controversy and angst toward the construction of early cities surfaces because of who the architect and urban planner is (Cain) and the circumstances (murder and exile) leading up to the founding of Enoch. In the story of Cain and the repercussions of his murder of Abel, he feared for his life (Gen 4:14). Could this have been the primary motivating factor of his desire to build a city? Some, like Conn and Ortiz (2001), contend that the creation of the first city mentioned in Scripture was the direct result of Cain not trusting in God's protection from retaliation.² "Even Cain, skeptical of a divine response to retaliation, acknowledges the shelter that the city offers for his posterity (Gen 4:14,17)" (p.87). Eric Jacobsen (2003) mentions that Cain's motivations for the construction of Enoch are dark, brooding, and sinful: "Cain's impulse toward city life seems to come directly out of a broken relationship with the land, his family, and God. The city functions as a surrogate for these primary relationships, providing an alternate form of protection and provision for the banished human" (p. 37). Keller (2012) posits that the formation of the first city represents a mixture of both the positive and negative, "The founding of the city comes as the result of Cain's search for security and of God's granting his request (Gen 4:14-15). In other words, the city is seen as a refuge, even from the very beginning" (p. 138).

Stepping away from biblical scholarship, a look at the circumstances surrounding the formation of the first cities in the ancient Near East does not paint their emergence with skepticism and disregard as if they are the products of sinful humanity. Ironically, the founding of the first cities appears to be a natural outflow of humanity being made image bearers of God, both in creativity and in being relational. Therefore, it can be argued that the formation of the first cities was and is a God-glorifying endeavor. That does not dismiss dysgenic features of cities both then and now nor corruption, abuse,

² Others like Jacques Ellul (1970) in *The Meaning of the City* also assert that the city was a direct result of sin and disobedience.

control, and so on. We only have to look to both the nation of Israel and the church as both being called and set apart by God to be a channel of blessings to the nations (Genesis 12 and Matthew 28). Called and set apart, but tainted with sin and dysfunction. That does not negate their divine calling and origins.

Why did cities happen? According to the urban historian and professor of Urban Studies at Portland State University, Carl Abbott (2012), technological advancements were one of the primary enablers for the birth of cities in the ancient Near East. Scholars, such as archaeologist V. Gordon Childe, note there are three key Urban Revolutions in history. “According to Childe, the first revolution—from old Stone Age hunter-gatherer cultures to settled agriculture—was the Neolithic Revolution. The second—the movement from neolithic agriculture to complex, hierarchical systems of manufacturing and trade that began during the fourth and third millennia BCE—was the Urban Revolution. And the third major shift in the record of human cultural and historical development—the only new development since the rise of cities—was the Industrial Revolution” (LeGates & Stout, 2011, p. 31).

Others, like Manuel Castells and Jeb Brugmann, contend that what we are experiencing now in regards to the rural-to-urban migration, technological leaps, and globalization is indeed a new type of urban revolution—a fourth revolution—an Information Revolution. “Castells begins with the observation that the twenty-first-century world has entered ‘a new age, the Information Age’ characterized by a new ‘network society’ and the ‘informational city,’ the postmodern equivalent of the ‘industrial city’ of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (LeGates & Stout, 2011, p. 572). Castells (2011) writes, “Spatial transformation must be understood in the broader context of social transformation: space does not reflect society, it expresses it, it is a fundamental dimension of society, inseparable of the overall process of social organization and social change. Thus, the new urban world arises from within the process of formation of a new society, the network society, characteristic of the Information Age” (p. 574). Brugmann (2009) affirms this notion when he comments, “Our incessant city

building, in particular over the last half century, has created a connected, worldwide system of cities through which we have been reengineering global economics, politics, and ecology in ways still barely understood” (p. 5).

The common denominator in these urban revolutions is technological advancements that allowed for agglomeration and density. The same principle applies in the ancient Near East or with the Industrial Revolution. “Why did the rural-urban migration occur? The reason was that the rise in technological enhancement of human productivity, together with certain constant factors, rewarded urban concentration” (Davis, 2011, p. 25).

How does the story of Cain and the creation of the biblical city of Enoch factor into this conversation? Cain was cursed from the ground (Gen 4:11–12), which could be argued was a key catalyst and motivating factor for urbanization. Technological advancements, along with a more organized social order and division of labor, allowed for people to specialize, including growing more crops for a larger population. As a result, through organization and collaboration, Cain did not need to directly be tied to working the ground to sustain a living. “Both the physical structure and socio-economic complexity of the earliest cities are unlike anything that had come before” (LeGates & Stout, 2011, pp. 15–16). Urbanization allowed him to exist in this genesis of the first Urban Revolution.

What we do know is that Cain was in the right place at the right time.

The alluvial basin between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, in contemporary Iraq, proved an ideal environment for a precipitous leap to urbanism. Here, in the area later known to the Greeks as Mesopotamia, the arid desert was broken by reedy swamps, with waters overflowing with fish, and banks teeming with wildlife. Here, too, sprouted native grains, wheat and barley, which could be cultivated into reliable crops, rewarding the Neolithic farmer with the critical surpluses upon which the beginning of urban civilization depended. (Philips, 2009, p. 4)

Technological advancements such as irrigation gave these early urban inhabitants the ability to grow more food for their growing population. “About 5,000 years ago irrigation cultivation (combined with stockbreeding and fishing) in the valleys of the Nile, the Tigris-Euphrates and the Indus had begun to yield a social surplus large enough to support a number of resident specialists who were themselves released from food-production” (Childe, 2011, p. 35).

Technological advancements and innovation were far more than agriculturally based; they also factored into architecture and urban planning. University of Arizona Professor of Archaeology Michael E. Smith (2007) notes, “Ancient kings and builders were clearly involved in ‘urban planning,’ and their cities were ‘planned’ settlements, following common sense notions of planning. Yet most ancient cities are classified as ‘unplanned’ in the literature on historical urbanism” (p. 3). A break from villages finds that there was a great deal more planning and design that went into the formation of ancient cities. When we read, “Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch” (Gen 4:17), it was more than merely a haphazard undertaking. Design factored into the creation of cities, which allowed cultures to flourish. It also created public or shared spaces for interactions to occur with greater frequency than rural areas.

Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout (2011) offer a key insight as to the intersection of the formation of cities and this concept of community, which I argue flows from the triune God: “If cities are civilization, they are also the cultural instrumentality by which humanity has attempted, since neolithic times, to achieve a higher, more inclusive concept of community” (p. 16). This is a much higher view, and more positive, than even many biblical scholars, who believe that the first city, Enoch, was the direct result from sin, rebellion, disbelief, and disobedience. However, what we do find in the Genesis account, along with archaeological findings, is the beginning of the rural-to-urban migration. The city of Enoch exemplified this trend, regardless of what one thinks of the motives. Since then, the processes of urbanization and the growth of cities were set in motion. “The first cities represented settlement units hitherto unprecedented size. Of course it was not just

their size that constituted their distinctive character. We shall find that by modern standards they appeared ridiculously small and we might meet agglomerations of population today to which the name city would have to be refused. Yet a certain size of settlement and density of population is an essential feature of civilization” (Childe, 2011, p. 33).

Childe sets forth 10 criteria to distinguish these early cities, such as Enoch, from contemporary villages. Cities did not result from villages growing large, but instead there was a decisive and purposeful creation of cities. These characteristics set them apart from villages. Looking at these criteria will give us insight into what Enoch may have looked like and possibly some of its attributes.

- In point of size the first cities must have been more extensive and more densely populated than any previous settlements, although considerably smaller than many villages today.
- In composition and function the urban population already differed from that of any village. Very likely indeed most citizens were still also peasants, harvesting the lands and waters adjacent to the city. But all cities must have accommodated in addition classes who did not themselves procure their own food by agriculture, stock-breeding, fishing or collecting—full-time specialist craftsmen, transport workers, merchants, officials and priests.
- Each primary producer paid over the tiny surplus he could wring from the soil with his still very limited technical equipment as tithe or tax to an imaginary deity of a divine king who thus concentrated the surplus.
- Truly monumental public buildings not only distinguish each known city from any village but also symbolize the concentration of the social surplus.
- All those not engaged in food-production were of course supported in the first instance by the surplus accumulated in temple or royal granaries and were thus dependent on temple or court.
- They were in fact compelled to invent systems of recording and exact, but practically useful, sciences. Writing is thus a significant, as well as a convenient, mark of civilization.
- The invention of writing—or shall we say the invention of scripts—enabled the leisured clerks to proceed to the

elaboration of exact and predictive sciences—arithmetic, geometry and astronomy.

- Other specialists, supported by the concentrated social surplus, gave a new direction to artistic expression.
- A further part of the concentrated social surplus was used to pay for the importation of raw materials, needed for industry or cult and not available locally.
- So in the city, specialist craftsmen were both provided with raw materials needed for employment of their skill and also guaranteed security in a State organization based now on residence rather than kinship. The city was a community to which a craftsman could belong politically as well as economically. (Childe, 2011, pp. 36–38)

When we read of the creation of Enoch in Genesis, we are left with murky descriptors as to the motivation and process of city building. All we know is “Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch; and he built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch” (Gen 4:17). However, what archaeology and anthropology as urban disciplines do is fill in the gaps of our understanding of what Enoch was like and how it functioned.

One of the most important components of this exploration into the dusty origins of Enoch is that this was representative of a larger global shaping movement called the first Urban Revolution. What this did was to set into motion the process of urbanization that we are still in today. We can trace our urban lineage and origins to ancient cities like Enoch. This gives us insight as Brugmann (2009) states: “The media have been keen to report that ‘half the world’s population now live in cities,’ but we are overlooking the main event: half the world has become *the City*” (p. 10). What takes place with the construction of cities like Enoch is the beginning of the urban trajectory of where the *missio Dei* is to play out.

Immediately after the Fall in Genesis 3, we read of the first murder in Genesis 4. On the heels of that event was the first city recorded in Scripture. However, the entrance of sin into the world does not taint the urban trajectory of Genesis 1; it simply means there are now competing values and spiritual forces at play in cities both historically

and today. “Despite sin’s radical distortion and God’s urban purposes, the city remains a mark of grace as well as rebellion, a mark of preserving, conserving grace shared with all under the shadow of the common curse. Urban life, though fallen, is still more than merely livable” (Conn & Ortiz, 2001, p. 87).

In one sentence in Genesis 4—verse 17—is captured the beginning point of the rural-to-urban migration that has begun to transform how humanity dwells on the planet. It also acts as a starting point for further exploring this rural-to-urban dynamic that is played out in Scripture. To make the case for “the urbanity of the Bible” is to acknowledge the urban thread woven throughout.

Chapter 3

City of Darkness, City of Light

As cities in North America continue to revitalize in their city centers and central business districts, more people are moving back into these parts of the city. This is in contrast to the 1950s through the 1990s when many of these same districts and neighborhoods experienced a hollowing out effect as cities expanded on their edges. Many people moved to these fringe neighborhoods (if they were able to move) in hopes of escaping urban poverty and rising crime. In the imaginations and reality of many, the term and descriptor “urban” was synonymous with degraded, dark, sinful, and dangerous.

As North American cities are rapidly transforming in light of what has been dubbed the “Information Revolution” (or the “Information Age”) or other factors like moving from a Fordist to a Post-Fordist economy (creative- or knowledge-based), it is calling for a recalibration of terms and how we view the city. In many cities across the continent, those old labels (degraded, dark, sinful, and dangerous) no longer apply. In its place, through urban revitalization and gentrification, “urban” is being redefined. Many cities, like inner-city Portland, can now be described as hipster, creative, safe, economically and culturally vibrant, and a great place to live. This constant shuffling and reorientation of our cities affects how we view them, and how we view them theologically.

As an example, one's view of North Portland¹ is drastically different if the year is 1993 versus 2013. Either the city is characterized by blight and desperation or hope and a bright future.

All around cities in North America are signs of transition and hope for urban dwellers. It could be in the form of a new modern streetcar system that promises to catalyze economic redevelopment and new investment, an old warehouse and light industrial district that has been rezoned as an urban revitalization district, or the presence of a burgeoning artisan economy that bolsters a city's economic outlook. These are some of the movements that are transforming cities and even our view of cities. It is easy for us to enjoy cities now and look favorably upon them. The trends are also reflective of this reality as more and more Americans are indeed moving back into the city. In light of this, there is much optimism in regards to how a society views the city.

In contrast, many cities in the Majority World do not share the same attributes as postindustrial cities of Western Europe and North America. The dysgenic features that defined industrial cities in the mid-1800s through the 1900s in some ways have transferred to cities in developing nations. Whereas many of our cities in the West were once overcrowded, disease-infested, unsanitary, and unsafe as the urban infrastructure was unable to keep up with explosive urbanization, these same attributes apply now to many non-Western cities. Viv Grigg (2012) observes, "In the last decade, one billion people, many with chickens under their feet, have careened in overloaded buses from rural areas to the new megacities. They are setting up illegal shacks wherever they can find space. China alone is creating one thousand new cities this decade because of this migration. This rapid urbanization has progressed much faster than industrialization; thus most of the migrant slum dwellers live without civic infrastructure and remain

¹ For the latter half of the 20th century, North Portland was the hub for the African-American community in Portland. In the past decade, through the gentrification process, these neighborhoods are transforming with an influx of middle-class ethnic whites moving in, catalyzing rising real estate prices and a boom in economic development. For more about the specific process of gentrification and urban mission, read *Vespas, Cafes, Singlespeed Bikes, and Urban Hipsters* by Sean Benesh (2014) or "Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000" by Karen Gibson (2007).

underemployed or unemployed. This has created an environment of disorganization and moral and cultural disintegration” (pp. 17–18).

There is a growing economic disparity between slum dwellers and the affluent as Jayakumar Christian (2012) notes of cities like Delhi: “Today’s poverty is not merely about actual numbers of the poor and the oppressed but about the growing ‘gap’ between rich and poor. In a strange way, the city brings to the fore in a pronounced manner the gap—the worst of urban poverty” (p. 9). Here we are confronted with stark contrasts between cities in the West versus those in the Majority World where urban poverty is most often seen and felt in more acute ways. How one views the city—as a city of God or a city of Satan—a city of light or of darkness—will be influenced by the context of one’s own city.

For some, the city offers hope, new beginnings, a better future, and abundant opportunity. For many others, including more than 1 billion slum dwellers globally, the city is viewed more out of a framework of desperation, where simply surviving takes up one’s day, and the future may not be so bright. With these contrasts, how are we to view the city? City of darkness? City of light?

Robert Linthicum (1991) in his book *City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church* asserts in Chapter 1 under the heading “Called to a City,” “It is incumbent upon Christians today to recognize and enthusiastically enter the challenge of the new, emerging world. God is calling the church into the city. Our world is becoming an urban world—and this is an inevitable and irreversible trend” (p. 19). Later in the same chapter he asks a penetrating question: “I believe the starting place for a Christian, when considering the city, is with the question, ‘How does Scripture view my city?’ We can state the essential biblical assumption: The city is the locus of a great and continuing battle between the God of Israel and/or the church and the god of this world” (p. 23).

The question “How does Scripture view my city?” frames an essential question for this chapter. If we start with our current city, whether in a slum in Bangkok or a hipster district in Portland, Oregon, we will read our biases and assumptions into Scripture instead of the

other way around. For the slum dweller, it would be easy to view cities as curses and the products of sin (which bolsters the assertion that Cain's motives were indeed dubious). For the middle-class yuppie living in the Pearl District in Portland, it would be naive to assume that unequivocally the city is solely about blessing, prosperity, entertainment, and cultural consumption.

The origins of cities and their attributes as noted in Scripture paints cities accurately as both helpful and hurtful, depending on the city. "The biblical view of cities is neither hostile nor romantic. Because the city is humanity intensified—a magnifying glass that brings out the very best and worst of human nature—it has a dual nature. This is why the Bible depicts cities as places of perversion and violence and also places of refuge and peace" (Keller, 2012, p. 135).

We began this journey into cities in chapter 1 with seeing them as a product and outflow of the triune nature of God and the reality that humanity is made in the image of God. God is a communal and relational God, and humanity was created with that same impetus, so as a result cities are a natural by-product. Chapter 2 was focused on extracting insights from the origin of cities, including the first one recorded in Scripture in Genesis 4. By this time—Genesis 4 onward—cities play a key role in the unveiling and development of the *missio Dei*. In fact, more than any other place, cities are the backdrop—or more like the center stage—where this human drama and struggle is played out. However, stark contrasts are found in cities throughout the Old Testament. Whereas God may have established benevolent equitable cities, most often they ended up in ruin due to the self-implosion of urban dwellers who deviated from God's plan and intentions. In that regard, there are contrasts found between the city of light and the city of darkness.

City of Light

Timothy Keller (2012) notes, "When cities first arose, they created a distinct kind of human life within their walled, protected space. Out of this dense proximity flowed three signal features that mark urban

life” (pp. 135–136). These three signal features represent the best intentions of the way urban life was and is to function: safety and stability, diversity, and productivity and creativity. Joel Kotkin (2006) also points out that there are definitive markers of cities that are not only surviving, but thriving: “the sacredness of place, the ability to provide security and project power, and last, the animating role of commerce” (p. xxi).

Keller’s (2012) three signal features are some of the positive elements found represented in cities during the Old Testament period:

- First, because early cities had walls, a city meant greater *safety* and *stability*. Cities’ primary importance lay in their resistance to hostile forces, whether opposing armies, marauders, blood feud avengers, or wild animals. The walled safety of a city allowed for a far more stable life than was possible outside the city, and this led to the growth of human civilization. Because of this stability, systems of law and order were able to develop first in urban settings.
- Second, the biblical understanding of a city also implies greater *diversity*, which is a natural result of density and safety. Because minorities find them to be safe places to live, cities tend to become racially and culturally diverse.
- Third, in the Bible, cities were places of greater *productivity* and *creativity*. Human culture—technology, architecture, the arts—began to develop as cities were built (see Gen 4:11). The city feature brings street life and marketplaces, bringing about more person-to-person interactions and exchanges in a day than are possible anywhere else. The more often people of the same profession come together, the more they stimulate new ideas and the faster these new ideas spread. (pp. 136–138)

These are the beneficial and God-glorifying attributes of cities in biblical times, throughout history, and even today. At times, whether in cities of today or yesteryear, it is difficult to keep these attributes in perspective, especially when cities are truly marked by dysgenic features on many levels. However, that does not negate God’s intentions for these cities.

In chapter 5 “City of God: Ideal City” in *The Spirit of Christ and the Postmodern City*, Viv Grigg, like Keller, draws observations from

Genesis to set forth what a healthy and God-glorifying city looks like. From the outset, Grigg (2009) contends, “What is the nature of that ideal city of God? With simple attention to the first chapters of the book of Genesis, we can predict today’s cities and the nature of those cities. For cities *grow out* of the collective nature of humankind. That human nature reflects the very nature of God, described thirty-five times in the Mosaic or priestly account of Genesis 1. For humanity, created in the image of God, projects God’s nature onto its communal structures” (pp. 60–61).

Grigg exegetes the creation story in Genesis 1 and subsequently uses that as a backdrop for the impetus of the trajectory of urban life. This builds on the foundation that I began constructing in chapter 1 and furthers the biblical ideal of cities:

- *God of Time: Urban Development*—“*In the beginning*” defines a sense of time and process (for beginnings imply endings), as the opening statement in Genesis 1. The *fruitfulness* of Genesis 1 and multiplication of life indicate a process of growth and are foundation to themes of *urban development*.
- *God of Creation: Cities of Creativity*—“*In the beginning God created*” defines his subsequent right to rule. The trinity is here represented. Before the earth was formed, when all things were non-existent, *formless* and *void* (desert and wasteland), and one could hear a pin drop in the eternal silence, the Spirit (ruah = breath of God) *hovered over the waters*. Humankind, in his image, reflects that capacity to create something out of nothing, out of *desert* and *darkness*.
- *God the Communicator: Cities as Centres of Media and Learning*—“*And God said. . .*” God is also a communicating God. He is always speaking. The universe reverberates with his life-giving words and that conversation involves the Holy Spirit, who in turn continues within us, as a speaking being, speaking what is heard from Father and Son, speaking of the future, guiding into truth (John 16:12–15). All humanity in their image seeks to communicate so cities become the centre of the television channels, the Internet, the radio. Even when perverted, city dwellers still possess this inherent nature that reflects this communicating God. Thus a people and a city filled with the Spirit will find liberation of good communication.

- *God of Aesthetic: City as Environment*—A second aspect of “*and it was good*” is that the city, as communal reflection of the work of God, is to be aesthetically pleasing, just as the garden was good and was perceived of as good. In the mandate to *manage the earth*, he also holds the people of this city accountable for their spatial relationships and the contribution they make to this assigned task. A theology of urban planning flows from his fatherhood and his delegation of managerial responsibility.
- *God as Community: City as Community*—The city is also relational. God says “*let us make.*” While there is the possibility of the ‘royal we’ in the phraseology, the interpretive nature of John 1:1 indicates the presence of the Father, the Word and the Spirit. The Godhead is an “usness.” Inherent in creation are relational patterns that become the foundations of the relationships of the city.
- *God Structures: Cities as Structure*—In the first three days in Genesis, God *creates form out of a formlessness* and emptiness, then he fills the form with life. It become an integrated global and cosmic system, with an inherent goal. (pp. 60–66)

Does the city, beginning in Genesis 4, reveal and display what Keller and Grigg write about? Certainly each of the above attributes can be described for each and every city. Cities represent the highest concentration of the *imago Dei*. “Cities, quite literally, have more of the image of God per square inch than any other place on earth” (Keller, 2012, p. 141). However, the challenge is that Genesis 3 (the Fall) as an event took place between the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 and the first city in Genesis 4. Post-Genesis 4, we can certainly find ample evidence of the city marked by these God-glorifying attributes, most notably justice and equity. That topic will be the focus of Chapter 4. In the interim, what about the other side of the city? The city marked by sin and rebellion? The city of lies and deception, the city of Satan.

City of Darkness

Mandy Ford (2010), Vicar of Christ the King Church, does not hesitate in her assessment of cities as she writes in her chapter “Sin in the City: Salvation in the City” in *Crossover City: Resources for Urban Mission and Transformation*:

The city is bad for you. Whichever way you read that sentence, it remains true. The financial structures located in downtown New York and London are responsible for the collapse of our economies with all the attendant financial, social and health repercussions that inevitably follow a recession, and our urban environment itself is unhealthy since pollution, overcrowding, traffic, stress and the lack of green space in which to exercise, damage people more than any other habitat. The city is a poisoned place, its pavements and streets are toxic to their inhabitants. And it often seems as if the city is portrayed as morally poisoned in similar ways, as if its very fabric invites evil. (p. 64)

“In envisioning an ideal, we need to consider the parallel theme in the Scriptures, the city of humanity in opposition to the city of God” (Grigg, 2009, p. 67). Although the circumstances surrounding the formation of Enoch are murky, in some ways city building marks the continued rebellion of humanity after the Fall in Genesis 3. In Genesis 6:1 we read that “people began to multiply on the face of the ground, and daughters were born to them” and can assume this also included the growth of cities and the formations of new ones. However, the Genesis 1:28 impetus and command to “multiply” was instead tainted with sin. “The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (Gen 6:5). Humanity was indeed multiplying, but so was our wickedness and rebellion. Then came the flood and a new start. After the flood the Lord again reiterated this command. “God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth’” (Gen 9:1).

Life after the flood found humanity growing and multiplying again. Genesis 10 records Noah’s descendants expanding their families and populating new regions. Along with that expansion came the formation of numerous cities such as Nineveh² and Calah, which is called “the great city” (Gen 10:11–12), to name a few. It is clear that humanity was rapidly multiplying and, like a centrifuge, was being

² Nineveh would grow into a large city. “Ancient Nineveh was so large that it took three days to cross it on foot.” (Linthicum, 1991, p. 21)

spread out in ever-enlarging migration patterns. “These are the families of Noah’s sons, according to their genealogies, in their nations; and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood” (Gen 10:32). The multiplication and outward expansion was also synonymous with the formation of early cities as well as the process of urbanization.

What can definitively be noted is that the next city mentioned in Scripture is clearly marked by rebellion toward God. “As the Genesis narrative unfolds, we see that warring with the city’s great potential is a profound bent toward corruption and idolatry” (Keller, 2012, p. 139). There is no clearer picture early on than in Genesis 11. “And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a plain in the land of Shinar and settled there” (Gen 11:2). Once a site was established, then began the process of constructing a city from its very foundations. “Then they said, ‘Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves; otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth’” (Gen 11:4). The story continues:

The Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which mortals had built. And the Lord said, “Look, they are one people, and they have all one language; and this is only the beginning of what they will do; nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them. Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.” So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. (Gen 11:5–9)

The construction of the tower (of Babel) simultaneously with the city is reflective of the norm of cities in the ancient Near East. This was more than merely pitching a tent or setting up a camp. Constructing cities were complex and intensive endeavors. As Joel Kotkin (2006) points out, “Minerals, building stone, and timber were scarce. Rain was sporadic, and the rivers did not naturally, as in Egypt, inundate the larger areas of dry land around them. As a result, the settlers in this

region were forced to develop complex systems to irrigate their land” (p. 4). More than a neutral construction project, the creation of Babel and the tower was also indicative of early cities. “It is not surprising that temples celebrating the gods dominated the earliest primitive ‘skyline’” (Kotkin, 2006, p. 4).

What is notable is how quickly humanity forsook the Lord to worship false gods and construct idols. We see numerous other instances where the hand, power, love, and deliverance of the Lord was revealed only to be met with rejection and idol worship by the people.³ In this case, the construction of Babel was the trend of cities in this era, where the architecture and planning was formed around the worship of idols. “The city was a shrine. On its streets the gods and humankind lived in community. The citizen who passed through its gates approached ‘the center of the world’” (Conn & Ortiz, 2001, p. 84). Kotkin (2006) explains, “Within this area’s walls, the temple rose alongside the palace of the rulers and the homes of the principal citizens. These structures lent the whole district a sense of divine protection and security” (p. 5). Security from whom? God?

The birth of Babel (Babylon) reflects the city that stands in rebellion toward the Lord. “Babylon is used throughout Scripture as a symbol of a city fully given over to Satan” (Linthicum, 1991, p. 24). Linthicum (1991) goes on to expand on the motif of Babylon throughout Scripture that has its start in Genesis 11, “In between the first and last books of the Bible, the city of Babylon is synonymous with all that is dark and evil in a city. Babylon is painted in Scripture as a bureaucratic, self-serving, and dehumanizing social system with economics geared to benefit its privileged and exploit its poor, with politics of oppression and with a religion that ignores covenant with God and deified power and wealth (Isa 14:5–21; Jer 50:2–17, 51:6–10; Dan 3:1–7; Rev 17:1–6, 18:2–19, 24) (pp. 24–25). Keller (2012) affirms, “Babel, later called Babylon in the Bible, comes to serve as the

³ We see this in Exodus 32 after Israel was rescued from Egypt where all around were divine miracles and signs of God’s love and power whether in the form of plagues, the parting of the Red Sea, manna from heaven, water from a rock, etc. In the end, the people instead opted to worship a handcrafted idol instead of the living God.

archetype for urban culture arrayed against God (see Isa 13:19)” (p. 140).

Although the construction of Babel was halted, people eventually came back around to building and expanding the city. Although initially dispersed for rebellion, these early urban dwellers could not resist finishing the building of Babylon. Certainly this is one of the underlying reasons why this city has been a symbol of our rebellion toward God. Not only was the city completed, it became a powerful and influential city for a long time. “By 1900 B.C., the focus of Mesopotamian power had shifted to a new capital at Babylon. For the next 1,500 years, it would rank among the world’s greatest cities, the incubator of an urban culture on a scale not before seen anywhere” (Kotkin, 2006, p. 10). At this point, it would be easy to deduce that cities were never part of God’s original intentions for humanity and that we are better off in the Garden. “The city of Babel (Gen 11) epitomizes the ill fate of urban greed and aggrandizement. Furthermore, if one needs the reinforcement of negative images, the Genesis writers report that Abraham, as he would later be called, was told to leave his own highly developed urban civilization at Ur on the Tigris-Euphrates delta and give himself to a life of migration, mostly to rural areas” (Bakke, 1997, p. 40).

To contrast the first city mentioned in Scripture (Enoch) with the construction of Babel, we can make a few basic observations. First, God never condemns city building. For those in architecture, urban or transportation planning, rest assured: Cain was never condemned for his actions of building a city. This is why some, like myself, contend that Enoch was not a city of rebellion, but instead a city of refuge, a city marked by grace, and a city of second chances. The construction of cities was not the focal point in humanity’s rebellion toward God, it was their idol worship. The builders of the tower and Babel were halted in their construction process because of the rebellious intentions for their tower of worship to false gods (whether self or idols) and their city.

Second, this ancient form of a skyscraper (“Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens”) is not a condemned form of construction or architecture. Some may use this

passage to deride cities, particularly high-density cities, stating that God condemns skyscrapers. Again, it was the intentions of these buildings that God specifically addressed, not the height of the building. Cities are at the apex of humanity's creative genius, certainly a gift endowed by God. Like with any gift or skill, we can use it for selfish gain and ambition or for God's glory and purposes.

Putting It Together

Ray Bakke (1997) sums up well the tension of Genesis 4 when he writes, "The first city was founded by Cain, who, after breaking fellowship with God, needed a human community to compensate for lost fellowship (Gen 4). Cain's violent genes required the rule of law but permitted the flourishing of the arts. From the outset cities appear to have been a mixed blessings" (pp. 39–40). Mixed blessings, indeed. We read that reality in the earliest cities and can trace that theme throughout the rest of Scripture. At times, in cities we find the utmost beauty and display of common grace, equity, and justice. Other times we find destruction, idol worship, immorality, and neglect of the poor. The cities simply happen to be the center stage where the drama of humanity is played out. Cities are tools for blessings or curses. They can either be used to honor God or follow in the footstep of the first deceiver, Satan.

Chapter 4

City as Blessing

As an urban cyclist, I am on my bicycle riding through the streets of the city nearly seven days a week. Whether commuting through the Portland rain or on a workout ride during the lunch break, cycling affords me ample time to get caught up on podcasts or simply listen to my music selection. From time to time I enjoy allowing my music selection to be played on the random feature, which dips into the rarely listened to portion of my albums. Recently, as I was climbing Rocky Butte in northeast Portland on my singlespeed, an old song from the late 1990s came on. The song was from the ska band extraordinaire *O. C. Supertones*. The song was “In Between” from their *Chasing the Sun* album (1999). The chorus of the song hit me as I hammered hard on my pedals as I ascended the butte: “Who I am is in between, what I wanna be and what I am.”

The song reveals the tension of our lives, as we know who we are in Christ, yet we fail to live accordingly. The song continues: “Pulling from both sides, humility and pride. One seeks to give, the other to be gratified.” As I was huffing and puffing from the climb, my mind immediately raced toward the city and the city as portrayed in Scripture. All of a sudden, the song became for me a descriptor of the city as we trace our way to rediscover the urban nature of the Bible. Starting with Enoch, traversing through Babel (Babylon), and through

the dusty streets of various cities in the Old Testament this “in between” theme is a prime marker and identifier of the status of cities.

In the last chapter, we held this in tension as we looked at cities as either a city of God (light) or a city of Satan (darkness). These features of cities have been personified in cities from the very beginning. Since I contend that cities originate from the triune God, then I also advocate that there was a plan and blueprint for how they were to function. Upon reading that, many might assume that since so many cities, of yesteryear and today, are marked by dysgenic features, that they could hardly be God’s plans or intentions. However, the “In Between” song reveals the tension of not only our personal lives, but the state of cities as well as of creation itself.

Psalm 107 is an oft-quoted passage when it comes to the importance of cities and their status as a refuge, safety net, and place of new beginnings. “Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in” (Psalm 107:4–7, ESV). This represents a significant leap compared to exploring Babylon in the last chapter. This is not to be dismissive of many cities represented and detailed throughout the Old Testament, but an admission of the duality of cities as found in Scripture. They are certainly representative of the “In Between” song. “Who I am is in between, what I wanna be and what I am.”

Often the dual nature of cities is housed within the same city. Meaning, vibrancy and decay, prosperity and abject poverty, beauty and ashes, are all found in the same metro area. Edward Glaeser (2011) reveals this tension when he writes:

The terrible prevalence of urban poverty seems to indict cities as places of inequality and deprivation. Many urban analysts see a great crisis in the problem of the megacity, which usually means the vast numbers of poor people living in Mumbai or Mexico City. It seems wise to many to limit the growth of these megacities, whose crowds and squalor doom millions to harsh, dead-end lives. In the developed world, cozy, homogeneous suburbs can appear far

mare egalitarian than the extraordinary urban gulfs that separate a Fifth Avenue billionaire from a ghetto child.

But the preceding paragraph is filled with nonsense. The presence of poverty in cities from Rio to Rotterdam reflects urban strength, not weakness. Megacities are not too big. Limiting their growth would cause significantly more hardship than gain, and urban growth is a great way to reduce rural poverty. The seemingly equal world of the suburbs is in many ways more of a problem for society as a whole, especially those people who can't afford its pleasures, than the unequal world of the city.

Cities aren't full of poor people because cities make people poor, but because cities attract poor people with the prospect of improving their lot in life. (p. 70)

The last sentence from Glaeser fits with the scope of Psalm 107. People move to cities in hopes of a better life. Not only that, but urban poverty reflects urban strength. It shows in many cases that cities really do work. "They flock to urban areas because cities offer advantages they couldn't find in their previous homes" (Glaeser, 2011, p. 70). Cities provide stepping-stones into the middle class and out of poverty for millions. In that way, we can affirm that cities are blessings from God and a means of common grace. However, yet again, we need to also affirm the "In Between" tension of cities as Glaeser goes on to point out. "Urban poverty is not pretty—no poverty is pretty—but the favelas of Rio, the slums of Mumbai, and the ghettos of Chicago have long provided pathways out of destitution for the poor. In some cases, the dream of upward mobility is not coming true, but that is a reason to continue fighting for our cities, not to place our hope in rural life, especially in the developing world" (Glaser, 2011, p. 90).

Cities have demonstrated attributes since their origins as places of refuge, rescuing, and even "salvation." Not salvation in the sense of spiritual regeneration or justification by faith through the Holy Spirit, but "the act of saving or protecting from harm, risk, loss, destruction, etc" ("Salvation" n.d.). In a broad sense, cities are protecting people from harm, loss, and destruction. This is the impetus behind Psalm 107 and the reasoning behind God purposefully sending people to cities.

Glaeser (2011) affirms this when he compares urban versus rural poverty and that while people move to the cities, and often into slums, there is potentially more hope and a brighter future than if they stayed home on the farm:

Rio's slums are densely packed because life in a favela beats stultifying rural poverty. Rio has long offered more economic opportunity, public service, and fun than the desolate areas of Brazil's hinterland. America's ghettos were filled by immigrants fleeing pogroms or poverty and by African Americans fleeing the hardships of agricultural work in the Jim Crow South. The great economic engine of nineteenth-century Manchester was associated with vast amounts of poverty, not because the city was failing but because its mills were attracting rural folk eager for work. Indeed, we should worry more about places with too little poverty. Why do they fail to attract the least fortunate? (p. 71)

Salvation is a heavily used term and yet what is unclear are the ramifications and the scope of salvation (both spiritual and physical). What is the outworking of Jesus's death, burial, and resurrection? What is the scope of the Gospel? For too long we have narrowly defined salvation as the rescuing of souls from darkness to light in the life of the individual (eternal life). Again, this is completely true, and I affirm it. In addition, though, what is seen in the "salvation process" of individuals is that transformation begins changing *everything* in a person's life (sanctification). Some have called this *redemption and lift*,¹ where all the various spheres in our life are affected: our family relationships, our business dealings, our integrity, our love and concern for the marginalized, greater compassion, self-denial and sacrifice, and so on. The Gospel invades, redeems, and begins "saving" every area of our lives as we surrender to Christ.² In that sense then, "salvation" is an overflow of the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ as he rescues us.

¹ I first heard this from Dr. Gary McIntosh in a lecture given at Simpson University in Redding, CA.

² I understand that it can be argued that this falls under the heading of "sanctification." The point I am trying to make is that Christ's redemption is more than eternal life after death, but he begins redeeming and transforming everything in our lives.

By faith we are transformed, saved, and redeemed, which then begins affecting everything else. John Kuhrt (2010), Director of Community Mission, explains:

Too often in history the gospel has been individualized to suit the rich and powerful and to deny the radical biblical critique of social and structural sin. This needs to be exposed but not in favour of a lop-sided focus that disregards the personal aspects of sin and salvation. This is equally ineffectual and dangerous. Too often middle-class analysis of urban issues (homelessness is a great example) falls into the trap of minimizing personal agency and personal responsibility in a way that simply does not ring true to real-life experience. To avoid the pendulum swing within this false dichotomy, it is essential that we go deeper—to grasp the depth of sin's effect on the whole world and embrace the radical and holistic nature of our salvation in Christ. (p. 75)

Millard Erickson (1998) affirms this when he states, “The meaning of the term salvation may seem somewhat obvious to persons familiar with it. Yet even within Christian circles there are rather widely differing conceptions of what salvation entails” (p. 902). Some of the questions of debate then revolve around the “objects of salvation.” Swanson and Williams (2010) add to the conversation when they write, “The redemption of the cross goes far beyond simply bringing us to heaven. In light of this, the gospel we share should address not only the spiritual consequences of our sin and rebellion but also the social and economic consequences” (p. 135).

First of all, salvation is rooted in the finished work of Christ. “After the Fall, humans found that they had cut themselves off from God and had become subject to death. In order to draw them back to himself, God laid down the basis for their acceptance in the redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ” (Bilezekian, 1993, p. 144). But what is the nature or scope of salvation? Is salvation only about life after death in eternal bliss, or are there on-earth ramifications? David Bosch (1991) comments, “Over against this approach we have to affirm that redemption is never salvation *out* of this world but always salvation *of*

this world. Salvation in Christ is salvation in the context of human society en route to a whole and healed world” (p. 399).

Prior to that quote, Bosch both admonishes and reminds us that salvation is a work of God and not something we can usher in ourselves. “It was self-deception to begin to think and act as if salvation lay in our grasp, was at our disposal, or was something we could bring about” (Bosch, 1991, p. 397). But what is salvation? The finished work of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection impact more than simply populating heaven. For starters, how was the word used in the Old Testament? In *Nelson’s Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament*, “salvation,” as used in the Old Testament, is multi-faceted:

yesu’ah (3444), “salvation.” This word appears about 78 times and refers primarily to God’s acts of help which have already occurred and had been experienced. In Gen. 49:18 (the first biblical occurrence), the word includes the idea of “salvation” through divinely appointed means and from inequity.

The noun *teshu’ah* also means “salvation.” It occurs about 34 times. The word is frequently joined with responses of thanksgiving and rejoicing (Judg. 15:18—the first occurrence; 1 Sam. 11:13). *Teshu’ah*, therefore, is sometimes rendered “deliverance” (Judg. 15:18), “victory” (2 Sam. 19:2), as well as “salvation” (Is. 45:17). The idea of “salvation” is that of preservation from threatened, impending, and perhaps deserved danger and suffering.

The noun *yesha’* which occurs 36 times, signifies that which God will do in man’s behalf (2 Sam. 22:3), or that which has been done by Him for man (2 Sam. 22:36). In two instances this word means simply the general absence of oppression and need (Job 5:4, 11). The word may be translated as “salvation” or “safety.” (Unger & White, n.d.)

The point is that when we use the terms “save” or “salvation” we pack into it a lot of theological terminology and assumptions.

What this little exercise reveals is that the notion of salvation—God’s saving, God’s rescuing—is much greater than simply populating heaven in life after death. In fact, that is a narrow scope of the term. So what does the term salvation mean, and how does it relate to the

concept of cities as blessings? Salvation, especially as noted in the Old Testament, has a wider scope than simply justification by faith in the life of an individual. While I hold to a conservative and traditional evangelical view on salvation, it is this wider concept of “rescuing” that I believe highlights the salvific nature of cities. Salvific in terms of *common grace* and not *saving grace* as historically understood. Wayne Grudem (1995) aptly states, “Common grace is different from saving grace in its *results* (it does not bring about salvation), in its *recipients* (it is given to believers and unbelievers alike), and in its *source* (it does not directly flow from Christ’s atoning work, since Christ’s death did not earn any measure of forgiveness for unbelievers, and therefore did not merit the blessings of common grace for them either)” (pp. 657–658). Both common grace and saving grace are instrumental in terms of cities, how we view them, and even our posture in living in, serving, and loving them.

Grudem (1995) goes on to detail several examples of common grace that are worth repeating:

- *The Physical Realm*—The earth does not produce only thorns and thistles (Gen. 3:18), or remain a parched desert, but by God’s common grace it produces food and materials for clothing and shelter, often in great abundance and diversity.
- *The Intellectual Realm*—All people are able to have some grasp of truth; indeed, some have great intelligence and understanding. This also must be seen as a result of God’s grace. The common grace of God in the intellectual realm also results in an ability to grasp truth and distinguish it from error, and to experience growth in knowledge that can be used in the investigation of the universe and in the task of subduing the earth.
- *The Moral Realm*—God also by common grace restrains people from being as evil as they could be. This inward sense of right and wrong that God gives to all people means that they will frequently approve of moral standards that reflect many of the moral standards in Scripture.
- *The Creative Realm*—God has allowed significant measures of skill in artistic and musical areas, as well as other spheres in which creativity and skill can be expressed.

- *The Societal Realm*—God’s grace is also evident in the various organizations and structures in human society. Human government is also a result of common grace. It was instituted in principle by God after the flood (see Gen. 9:6), and is clearly stated to be given by God in Romans 13:1.
- *The Religious Realm*—Even in the realm of human religion, God’s common grace brings blessings to unbelieving people. Although God has not promised to answer the prayers of unbelievers as he has promised to answer the prayers of those who come in Jesus’ name, and although he has no obligation to answer the prayers of unbelievers, nonetheless, God may out of his common grace still hear and grant the prayers of unbelievers, thus demonstrating his mercy and goodness in yet another way (cf. Ps. 145:9, 15; Matt. 7:22; Luke 6:35–36). (pp. 658–662)

God’s rescuing, saving, and redeeming people (both common and saving grace) mean that often, like we read in Psalm 107, “He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in.” Thus we can conclude that the urbanization process, both historically and today, has divine origins and intentions. God has and continues to draw people to the city as he loves and cares for them. He desires to see them rescued and saved both from such things as rural poverty, but also from their sin and alienation from God. Those two converge in the city, where God’s people await.

Jon Kuhrt (2010) alludes to this larger scope or framework when he writes “The crisis of violence, poverty and meaninglessness in our urban areas desperately needs the good news of the kingdom of God. How can we share a holistic gospel which integrates the personal, social and political imperatives of salvation” (p. 75). Timothy Keller (2012) also notes the reality that the Gospel affects so much more than our standing with God. “Unlike legalism or antinominalism, an authentic grasp of the gospel of Christ will bring increasing transformation and wholeness across all dimensions of life that were marred by the fall. By removing the primary cause of all of our alienations—our separation from God—it also treats the alienations that flow from it. The gospel addresses our greatest need and brings change and transformation to every area of life” (p. 48). This certainly precludes the outworking in the

city. Kuhrt (2010) points out the larger scope of salvation, especially in relationship to the city, whether today or in biblical times: “The biblical picture of salvation is rich and multi-faceted. The whole biblical ‘meta-narrative’ is a salvation history, of how a loving Creator God is working out his redemptive purposes for the whole creation” (p. 76). This also highlights the notion of city as a blessing and part of “God’s rescue program” for humanity.

- *Salvation as wholeness*—In the Bible we see that salvation centres on restoring the whole person (not just the ‘soul’) to a proper network of relationships. It embraces forgiveness in relation to both each other and God, as well as healing and a proper attitude to others and the whole of creation.
- *Salvation as liberation*—Salvation entails liberation from oppression. This is most clearly illustrated in the Exodus story of Israel’s liberation from the injustice and oppression of slavery. In the books of prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Micah (Isaiah 3.13–15, Jeremiah 22.13–17, Amos 5.11–15, Micah 2.1–2) we see a denouncement of the sin that is expressed and embodied in social structures that oppress and dehumanize.
- *Salvation as forgiveness*—A central focus of salvation is on people experiencing forgiveness for their guilt in participation in wrong-doing. In line with the Passover, God has acted through Jesus to both conquer and justly forgive the sin of humanity rather than simply ignore it.
- *Salvation as affirmation*—The Christian story is deeply affirming for humanity, for we are made in the image of the Creator God, his identity imprinted on every person. It is this identity and worth that is affirmed through the saving action of Christ. The life, death and resurrection of Christ does expose and judge the world of sin but it also displays the astonishing extent of God’s love for us. (Kuhrt, 2010, pp. 76–79)

To begin assembling all of these disparate pieces reveals that cities are indeed a blessing of God, a gift of common grace, and that God uses cities to “save” or “rescue” people. Obviously, this is not meant to be a neat and tidy assertion, the city is still tainted and affected by sin, both individual and systemic. To revisit Glaeser’s contention that slums and

urban poverty reveals that cities actually do “work” becomes an affirmation of cities as places of blessing and rescuing.

Now fast-forward the story from Enoch and Babel to cities after the Egyptian exodus to reveal a definitive transition in the purpose of cities. What was in embryonic form now expands into a greater capacity for the purpose of cities and divine intention. “With the establishment of Israel in the Promised Land, the biblical depiction of cities becomes more positive” (Keller, 2012, p. 140). Keller (2012) continues after this statement to explore the reasoning behind the construction of cities in the Promised Land. “Why did God command the building of cities? Cities with walls and a gathered population could protect an accused person and conduct a trial in a way that villages and rural areas could not. Without cities, a crime or accident could lead to an endless cycle of violence and reprisals. The safety and density of cities enabled a system of jurisprudence to develop around the rule of law. God commands the establishment of cities in Israel to establish justice” (p. 140).

This certainly fits into the salvation motif as understood as “the act of saving or protecting from harm, risk, loss, destruction, etc” (“Salvation” n.d.). Not only were these cities to be safe havens or the landing places for immigrants, they were to be marked by a completely different ethic that was counterintuitive to contemporary cities. Andrew Davey (2002) writes, “Yet throughout the prophets we find the conviction that the urban, however corrupted, can be restored, regenerated, and redeemed, that it can be home to the exile, that it can offer sanctuary to the stranger and justice to the oppressed and persecuted” (p. 62).

There are a number of benefits or attributes to cities that God set up that reveal the “city as a blessing.” They include:

- Cities as places of refuge
- Cities as incubators of commerce
- Cities as catalysts for creativity and innovation
- Cities as places of equity and care for the marginalized
- Cities as conduits of the *missio Dei*

In *View From the Urban Loft*, I ask, “If God was the author of cities, does he then offer us a way to live within them? Is there some sort of blueprint or template that we can find scattered across the pages of the ancient Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) that gives us a framework for living in cities in the here, the now, and the future” (Benesh, 2011, p. 68). For the remainder of this chapter, I will expand on the list I noted above as we look at some of the “blessing features” of cities. As I have articulated already, there is a dual nature to cities. Therefore, when I flesh out this list I am not dismissive of these negative attributes, but instead highlight the intention of cities as places of blessing.

The cities in the Promised Land were to be operated by a different ethic (theocracy under YHWH) than their contemporary counterparts. At the beginning of Deuteronomy, the people of Israel, on the verge of moving into the Promised Land are told, in regards to the Law, “Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people’” (Deut 4:6). David Leong (2012) notes this when he writes, “Israel’s vocation through the Abrahamic covenant to be a channel of blessing to the nations was not to be fulfilled *in spite of* the perceived paganism or impurity of these cities; quite the contrary, the people of God were being called to live into the reality of this vocation *in, through,* and ultimately *for* these cities” (p. 4).

More than being a dwelling place for a better urban life, which it was, this marked a new way in which cities were to function under God’s theocratic reign, which exemplified equity, care for the marginalized, and economic vibrancy. The city was the place where the *missio Dei* was to be lived out as a testimony to the nations. “God has created, loved, preserved, and redeemed the city so that it can be transformed into the city God intends it to be. And as that transformed community, the city becomes a lighthouse to the world, the manifestation of God’s handiwork to the nation and the world” (Linthicum, 1991, p. 35).

Cities as Places of Refuge

This idea of cities as refuge fits into the Psalm 107 passage, “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in” (Psalm 107:6–7, ESV). Life outside the city was harsh, desperate, and cruel, but life within the walls was different. Not only did the walls of the city provide safety, but as we will see in the next point, they allowed for the city’s economy to flourish. “The walled safety of a city allowed for a more stable life than was possible outside the city, and this led to the growth of human civilization” (Keller, 2012, p. 136).

In a real way, migration to the city was a way, as I have previously noted, to escape rural poverty. That is not to overlook the problematic features of cities (Such problems should motivate us to get involved through community development initiatives, urban and transportation planning, job or business creation, creativity and the arts, education, or other areas.). However, cities are repeatedly referred to in Scripture as places of refuge. “Of the 150 psalms in the Psalter, 49 are city psalms” (Linthicum, 1991, p. 29). In light of Psalm 46, Linthicum does a remarkable job of contending that the city as a place of refuge was the Israelites testimony to their urban counterparts. “God’s presence in the temple safeguards and sanctifies the city of Jerusalem, even in the midst of unprecedented chaos and violence (v. 4). Because of that city’s presence in the world, nation lives at peace with nation and humanity can be still and silent before God, worshipping and working in fellowship and reconciliation with God (vv. 8–10)” (Linthicum 1991, pp. 30–31).

Cities as Incubators of Commerce

This point fits well into Kotkin’s (2006) framework of what makes cities healthy: sacredness of place, *animating role of commerce*, and safety or protection (p. xxi). When we read through the Mosaic Law, we see the importance of commerce and equitable economics. In postexilic Jerusalem, there were several motivating factors for the reconstruction

of the wall around the city. Not only did rebuilt walls offer protection and security, but they also allowed for commerce and a revitalized economy.

The city—biblical cities, throughout history, and today—is a reflection of culture but also an incubator and generator of new economics. Cities are complex systems. “Cities represent the convergence of identities, industries, and ideologies in a dynamic urban ecosystem of pluralism and globalization. Far more than just the incidental built environment that houses such phenomena, a city is a living, breathing organism with vital systems and infrastructure that function as a means of sustenance for its inhabitants. Ultimately, cities are a cultural reflection of our common humanity in all of its beauty and depravity” (Leong, 2012, p. 2).

Cities as Catalysts for Creativity and Innovation

Cities represent the greatest invention of humanity. This invention acts as a catalyst for other forms of creativity and innovation. Often throughout history we find the theme of “necessity as the mother of invention” evident as many innovations came out of need—the creation of sewers, advancements in architecture and safer buildings, the expanded capability to feed more people, transportation innovations to move greater numbers of people more efficiently, and more. Since cities are the highest form of invention and creativity, they act as a fertile ground for continued innovation, both on a small and large scale.

Cities also provide an agglomeration of creativity as artisans live within proximity of one another and learn from one another. Charles Heying (2010) observes this today in the growing artisan economy, which is a throwback to artisan economies before Fordism (industrialization). “In an artisan economy, microclusters in one industry seed clusters in other industries because they share cultural values, engage in cross-fertilizing social networks, use similar entrepreneurial techniques of collaboration and assemblage, and make use of common supplies of contract services” (p. 48). While this quote blends together economics and artistic expression, nonetheless it

highlights the role of cities as incubators of innovation. It is precisely the density of cities that allows for “cross-fertilizing social networks” as Heying mentioned. He also notes, as an example, “Most collaboration between the builders [bicycle frame], however, is informal and spontaneous. The nature of the business presents problems that can only be solved by others in the industry” (2012, p. 115).

Since their beginnings, cities have been incubators of innovation and creativity. This is a reflection on humanity being made in the image of our Creator God. Collecting people in cities simply means this creative impulse and output becomes multiplied exponentially.

Cities as Places of Equity and Care for the Marginalized

“Let it be said that much of the focus of the Old Testament is on justice for the poor” (Linthicum, 1991, p. 90). A cursory reading through the Law and the Prophets reveals this theme. Cities were to be marked by this new ethic of equity. “Throughout the Old Testament, we learn that God has given to his people the responsibility and privilege of defending the powerless and speaking up for those without a voice in our communities—the poor, widows, orphans, single moms, prisoners, immigrants, elderly, sick, and disabled” (Swanson & Williams, 2012, p. 141). Whether in Deuteronomy, the Psalms, or the Prophets, this theme is recounted again and again. “Throughout Deuteronomy, there are many instances where people are called to care for the fatherless, the widow, and the foreigner. This care was to be tangible and practical. Besides, when they extended this kind of care, particularly to the foreigner, it was a reminder that they too had been foreigners in Egypt” (Benesh, 2011, p. 73).

On a daily basis, I read at least one psalm. A couple of years ago, I decided that as I was reading through the Psalms I would highlight where concern for the poor, the widow, and the foreigner is mentioned. The Psalms in my Bible are now quite marked up. The theme is inescapable and is found not only in the Psalms, but throughout the Scriptures. Cities were to be marked by a radically new way of living, where the least and last were cared for. “Having just systems and

making sure those systems operate justly are not enough. God wanted the Israelites to *care sincerely* about their poor. Old Testament concern for the oppressed, exploited, and marginalized was not merely a matter of cold calculation of obligation and duty; it was to be acted on out of a heart of genuine compassion and sensitivity. It was not enough to create just systems; the nations had to long for justice and love those who were victims of injustice” (Linthicum, 1991, p. 92).

Cities as Conduits of the missio Dei

As mentioned above, cities were the primary place where the *missio Dei* was lived out. Keller (2012) notes the distinction between the Old and New testaments in terms of the trajectory of God’s mission to the world. “In the Old Testament, mission was *centripetal*; the flow was in toward the center. Israel was called to be an obedient people, becoming a society that displayed God’s glory for the nations to see (Deut 4:6–8). The nations were called to look and ‘come in’ and worship God. But in the New Testament, mission becomes *centrifugal*—moving outward from the center. The people of God are sent out to the world to proclaim the gospel (Matt 28:16–20; Acts 1–2)” (p. 147). The cities of God’s covenant people were to be marked by a different ethic, which is noted in the Mosaic Law. This was to be a testimony to the surrounding cities and nations.

Linthicum (1991) also buttresses this idea of the city as central to the mission of God, “Scripture stresses that the city is central to God’s plan of transformation and redemption of humanity and is therefore the locus of God’s salvation of humanity” (p. 80). This affirms the idea that the trajectory of the mission of God was and is urban. Cities are the conduits for where this mission was and is to be lived out. We see this in the Old Testament and can trace this development in the early church and through Paul’s missionary journeys, which went to cities.

As we’ve seen in this chapter, cities, although tainted, were and are places of blessings. Even though the fall in Genesis 3 continues to affect humanity—and cities are the highest collection points for humanity—they still work.

Chapter 5

Cities and the Kingdom of God

City building is a complex and arduous task with a multiplicity of moving parts. The complexities were apparent in antiquity but are even more compounded today with interest groups, political factions, economic investment (or lack thereof), design features, agendas, zoning and codes, progressive versus conservative planning, and much more.

Yesterday, over lunch at a popular downtown Portland deli, I met with a friend who works as a transportation planner for the city. The conversation quickly moved from current projects he is working on to the overall ideas around better planning and decision-making in the city. We talked about walkable neighborhoods, bikeable cities, and better public transit to move people around. In essence, we were having a discussion about what is an ideal city. While many would say Portland is a model city, with walkable and bikeable neighborhoods, an artisan economy, progressive planning, swank urban neighborhoods, and an overall hipster scene, are we an ideal city? Is there such a thing as a model city?

As we have explored since the beginning of this book, there is much to the idea of city building and the notion of an ideal city. Maybe not ideal in the sense of perfection, but ideal in some of the core tenants like equity, justice, safety, security, and vibrant economics. Cities and urban life are a natural byproduct of the relational nature of the triune God as he has created us as relational people. That does not

diminish the reality that sin has wrecked havoc on cities in biblical history, throughout history, and today. There is the dual nature of cities that we have explored, along with the concept that cities can indeed be a blessing and a place of refuge and redemption.

Throughout the Old Testament, we catch glimpses of a new future. Through much of the prophetic literature, though at times it is challenging to read, we get this sense of a future reality that looks markedly different from the present. The prophetic writings can be challenging to understand because the authors hop around in terms of the timeframe they are writing about. One moment they are talking about events that will transpire imminently, and then they suddenly jump to a distant reality, only to change back in the following sentence to talking about the present. Interpretations often vary depending on the reader's views concerning eschatology and theological framework (i.e., Dispensational, Amillennial, etc.) because that determines when one expects these future events to happen. For our purposes, we will simply note that there is an urban thread woven throughout passages that talk about the future reality of the fullness of the Kingdom of God.

Jane Jacobs and the Kingdom of God

Anyone who has read anything on the city more than likely has come across the name Jane Jacobs, whether hearing about her, reading her works, or both. She is to the urban planning world what Muhammad Ali was to boxing or Michael Jordan to basketball—a transcendent figure. She was a feisty advocate for preserving urban neighborhoods in the face of expanding freeways and development that sought to rip a hole in the urban fabric. “Jane Jacobs (1916–2006) started writing about city life and urban planning as a neighborhood activist and as associate editor of *Architectural Forum*, not as a trained professional. *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* hit the world of city planning like an earthquake when it appeared in 1961” (LeGates & Stout, 2011, p. 105).

One of the ideas that Jacobs is most known for is the concept of the urban neighborhood street as a “sidewalk ballet.” She saw this way

of life based on observations from her own neighborhood. As Brooklyn sociologist Sharon Zukin (2005) notes of Jacobs, “The journalist Jane Jacobs, whose family had moved into a mixed residential and industrial area in the oldest part of Greenwich Village, argued for the preservation of old buildings because they fostered social diversity” (p. 187). That experience helped shape her views of the city and vibrant urban life. “In ‘The Uses of Sidewalks: Safety,’ she outlines her basic notions of what makes a neighborhood a community and what makes a city livable. Basic urban vitality comes from residents’ participation in an intricate ‘street ballet,’ a diurnal pattern of observable and comprehensible human activity that is possibly only in places like Jacobs’ own Hudson Street in her beloved Greenwich Village” (LeGates & Stout, 2011, p. 105).

Jacobs (2011) writes, “The stretch of Hudson Street where I live is each day the scene of an intricate *sidewalk ballet*” (p. 109). In expanding on this idea of sidewalk ballet, she continues, “I know the deep night ballet and its seasons best from waking; long after midnight to tend a baby and, sitting in the dark, seeing the shadows and hearing the sounds of the sidewalk. Mostly it is a sound like infinitely pattering snatches of party conversation and, about three in the morning, singing, very good singing” (Jacobs, 2011, p. 109).

Through Jacobs’s writings, we are whisked away into a vibrant urban neighborhood that reflected urban advantage and a richly woven tapestry of street life. In regards to a dynamic street life, Eric Jacobsen (2003) writes, “Another advantage of living in a mixed-use neighborhood is the wider experience of community that it provides. In the first place, it allows people from different income levels to live near each other and interact with each other” (p. 92). The common theme is the vibrancy of street life in cities. Mixed-use zoning allows for this dynamic to take place. Not only that, but this creates districts of livable streets as Jeff Speck (2012) points out, “Sidewalks, like communities, thrive on diversity: different types of people use the streets at different times of the day, keeping them active around the clock” (p. 109).

This sidewalk ballet is not a new reality. With a careful eye toward detail, we find accounts like Jacobs describes in Scripture. The prophet

Zechariah offers a description of an urban sidewalk ballet. “Thus says the Lord: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain. Thus says the Lord of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets” (Zech 8:3–5). Zechariah pens words that sound strikingly similar to the modern day “prophet” of Jane Jacobs. Both are writing of a street scene that sounds inviting and vibrant.

It is to this notion of urban life that some today write longingly as they have watched such scenes vanish before their eyes. Zukin (2011) laments, “I do miss the look and feel of neighborhoods whose diversity was tangible in the smells and sounds of ethnic cooking, experimental art galleries and performance spaces, and faces and voices of men and women who came from everywhere to create the distinctive character of the streets” (p. x). She, too, is longing for authentic urban places. Ironically, so were the people of Israel as they sat in exile and reminisced about their city, Jerusalem. Few prophets had the unique vantage point of Zechariah.

Zechariah and Livable Streets

Considered a postexilic prophet, Zechariah lived both in Babylon and Jerusalem. “He was born in Babylon of a priestly family that returned to Jerusalem from Babylon when some 50,000 exiles trekked their way home under Cyrus” (Feinberg, 1990, p. 273). “Zechariah’s family was among the Jewish exiles who returned from Babylon in 536 B.C. under Zerubbabel (read Neh 12:4, 16)” (Jensen, 1978, p. 463). According to Jewish tradition, Zechariah played a key role in preserving the sacred writings and traditions of the Jews after the exile (Jensen, 1978, p. 463). Full of visions and Messianic prophecies, Zechariah’s writings are complex, multifaceted, layered, and, according to Charles L. Feinberg (1990), difficult to understand. “Complaints have been made both by Jewish and Christian interpreters of the difficulty in

interpreting the prophecies of Zechariah. It is admitted by them that his visions and oracles are the most Messianic and yet the most difficult of exposition” (p. 274).

My goal in bringing up the snapshot in Zechariah 8 is not to do a thorough exegesis of this prophet and his writings. Instead, I wish to point out ideals and visions of what life is to be like under the sovereign rule of God. God most certainly has a template—a blueprint of sorts—of what urban life is to look like both here and in the future. The foundation of a vibrant and healthy urban life lies in God’s intimacy with humanity, compassion, and justice. Without these things, cities fall into corruption and self-implosion. That does not negate the first (God’s love for us), but we know that when we wander God simply lets us gravitate toward self-destruction. Abraham Heschel (1969) writes, “What the prophets proclaim is God’s intimate relatedness to man. It is this fact that puts all of life in a divine perspective, in which the rights of man, as it were, are divine prerogatives. Man stands under God’s concern” (p. 219). It is out of that intimacy that compassion and justice flow. As Heschel (1969) points out, “God rules the world by justice and compassion, or love. These two ways are not divergent, but rather complementary, for it is out of compassion that justice is administered” (pp. 219–220).

Zechariah, as a postexilic prophet, writes with varying “lenses” as he talks about both the restoration of Jerusalem both now and in the future Kingdom to come. Irving Jensen (1978) comments that, “*Before* you begin your study of the postexilic prophets, review the historical setting before restoration. *Recall* when we speak of ‘restoration’ we are referring to the conditions accompanying the return of God’s people to Canaan from captivity” (p. 453). Jensen (1978) proceeds to explain that the contents of Zechariah include both *foretelling* and *forthtelling*, “The forthtelling is the prophet’s appeal to the people concerning their heart relationship to God, so that the work of their hands (for example, the Temple project) might prosper. The foretelling concerns Israel’s fortunes and judgments in the years to come, culminating in the nation’s glory when the Messiah comes” (p. 463).

When we read of the account of street life in Zechariah 8:3–5 there are multiple lenses or timeframes in which to view this. In studying prophetic literature, some call this a “near and far fulfillment.” As F. Duane Lindsey (1985)¹ explains, “Thus the third and fourth messages view the restoration from Exile in Zechariah’s day as a precursor of future blessing and prosperity in the Millennial age. They also place emphasis on that future time when righteousness, justice, and peace will fill the earth” (p. 1560). The debate revolving around this passage is whether it speaks of life in postexilic Jerusalem or life in the New Jerusalem in some distant future eternity in the fullness of the Kingdom of God. The answer, according to many scholars, is “both.” Feinberg (1990) writes:

When the spiritual issues are right in Israel, God always accompanies them with material blessings. Spiritual peace will be the forerunner of physical peace. Old men and old women with staff in hand will be able to sit peacefully and unafraid in the streets of Jerusalem. The streets of the city will be full of playing boys and girls. The intermediate ages are not excluded, but automatically included. Wars will not cut off the lives of her people in their youth. Her population will reach advanced age. The presence of boys and girls playing in the streets indicates both security and many descendants. (p. 309)

Interestingly, one of the realities of the fullness of the coming Kingdom of God is vibrant, livable streets. Considering Zechariah’s snapshot of God’s ideal urban landscape, let’s consider a contemporary vision for livable streets. Portland transportation planner Denver Igarita (2012), in his paper “Livable Streets Where People Live” as part of the *Urban Policy Paper Series*, says, “A livable street serves people of all ages in a variety of ways, and, particularly in residential areas, should do more than simply transport automobiles” (p. 1). As we see in Zechariah, and in many vibrant, walkable urban neighborhoods today, streets are more than transportation corridors for automobiles. “One of the

¹ It should be noted that Lindsey is writing from the theological framework of Dispensationalism.

common threads of the livable streets I discovered is that they emphasize the ‘sojourn’ (staying) function over the traffic functions by giving precedence to features that make them attractive places to dwell” (Igarta, 2011, p. 11).

Sojourn. Livable streets. Vibrant, urban neighborhoods. Prophecies originate in God; therefore, we can conclude that these are some of the attributes God desires in cities. Spiritual blessings go hand-in-hand with physical blessings, in this case as evidenced by safe, active, and populated streets. This most certainly will be a “sidewalk ballet” of beauty and grace. Therefore, in light of Zechariah’s God-inspired vision for a healthy city in God’s Kingdom, we need to ask whether or not we believe that God’s desire for livable streets and cities is only for the distant future after Christ’s return or whether it is for today’s urban dwellers as well. Does the Kingdom of God impact cities now or is it only in the future? I believe, like the scope of many of the prophecies, that the answer is “both.”

The Gospel of the Kingdom of God

“The kingdom, then, is relational, and the most appropriate and wholesome cure for a fractured society” (Christian, 1994, p. 210). What this quote by Jayakumar Christian alludes to is the nature of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God and, in light of the scope of this book, the relationship of the Gospel and the Kingdom of God to cities. Christian points out that the Kingdom is the answer to what ails society. Talking about the Kingdom quickly turns the conversation to the nature of the Gospel.

The Gospel is the announcement that the Kingdom of God is at hand. But is it really that simplistic? Timothy Keller (2012) asks, “What do we mean by ‘the Gospel’? Answering this question is a bit more complex than we often assume” (p. 29). Scot McKnight (2011) adds, “I think we’ve got the gospel wrong, or at least our current understanding is only a pale reflection of the gospel of Jesus and the apostles” (p. 24). In other words, exploring the Gospel announcement of the in-breaking Kingdom of God is instrumental in moving forward in

our understanding in our approach to cities. Jayakumar Christian (1994) contends that the Kingdom, which the Gospel (good news) announces, is the reality that the in-breaking Kingdom impacts much—cities, society, poverty, really everything. As we observed in Zechariah, the sidewalk ballet dealt with both a soon-to-be-reality and what urban life would look like when the Kingdom came in its fullness. As we're in this "in between" phase of "here" and "not yet," digging deeper into the nature of the Gospel of the Kingdom is invaluable.

In terms of the intersection of the urban nature of the Bible and the trajectory of the city's development in Scripture alongside key concepts of urban renewal and the Gospel, Eric Swanson and Sam Williams (2010) offer a healthy reminder: "Thinking about transformation is best done in the context of the kingdom of God. Leading from any other point of view will lead us to a less-than-biblical view of the world, its problems, the solution, and ultimate redemption" (p. 68). What is the Gospel? What is the Kingdom of God? While there is a healthy dialogue taking place in American Christianity around these topics, my goal here is to simply and humbly broach this conversation in regards to the city and the Kingdom both now and to come.

When we first come across the Gospel, we read how it is the announcement that the Kingdom of God is here. In Mark 1, the very first words recorded by Jesus are: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15). Obviously, that is a simplistic answer because each of the terms, "Gospel" and "Kingdom of God," are packed with soteriological and eschatological thickness that has resulted in thousands of books being written over the last two thousand years. The good news that John the Baptizer proclaimed in the wilderness, and that Jesus taught, was that indeed the Kingdom is at hand. However, that was only the beginning; otherwise Jesus would not have needed to stick around a few more years and die horrifically on the cross. If the Gospel were only an announcement that the "Kingdom was here," then Jesus could have left after the initial proclamation. But he didn't. He stayed. Not only that, but he taught extensively on what the Kingdom of God was and is like.

Based on his teachings through the Gospels, entrance into the Kingdom was more than simply personal salvation, though that is paramount and foundational. We were alienated from God in our sin and the good news of the Kingdom is that through repentance we can be redeemed and reconciled with God. But God's Kingdom also had a wider scope of transformation and new way of life.

Within the scope of this good news there is an individual element to it as well as a more corporate element. Keller (2012) states, "There are two basic ways to answer the question 'What is the Gospel?' One is to offer the biblical good news of how you can get right with God. This is to understand the question to mean, 'What must I do to be saved?' The second is to offer the biblical good news of what God will fully accomplish in history through the salvation of Jesus. This is to understand the question as 'What hope is there for the world'" (p. 32). Keller makes note of the individual salvation one receives as he or she enters the Kingdom. On the other hand, there is much more going on in the statement, "the Kingdom is near" or "the Kingdom is at hand." While individually our lives are transformed as we move from darkness to light, from sinner to saint, from enemy of God to friend of God, there is also a larger picture of what the Gospel message entails. Keller (2012) alludes to this as he writes about Jesus putting things right. "First, Jesus Christ put things right through his incarnation. The second way Jesus puts things right is through *substitution*. Because of the guilt and condemnation on us, a just God can't simply shrug off our sins. The third way Jesus will put things right is through the eventual restoration of all that has gone wrong in the world" (pp. 34–35). Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert (2011) expand on this two-part scope of the Gospel:

On the one hand, some would define the gospel as the good news that God is going to remake the world, and that Jesus Christ—through his death and resurrection—is the down payment on that transformation and renewal. They look at the gospel with the widest possible lens, taking in all the promises that God made to his people, including not only the forgiveness of sins but also the resurrection of the body, the transformation of the world, the establishment of God's kingdom, and all the rest.

On the other hand, there are those who would define the gospel as the good news that God acted to save sinners through the death of Jesus in their place and his subsequent resurrection. They look at the gospel with a narrow lens, focusing particularly on that which lies at the foundation of salvation. (p. 92)

They summarize:

It seems to us that these two groups—those who say the gospel is the good news that God is reconciling sinners to himself through the death and resurrection of Jesus (let’s call them “zoom-lens people”), and those who say that the gospel is the good news that God is going to renew and remake the world through Christ (call them “wide-angle people”)—are really answering two different though highly related questions. . . . The fact is, depending on how you think about it, neither the wide-angle person nor the zoom-lens person is off base. . . . In fact, the Bible asks both the question “What must a person believe in order to be saved?” and the question, “What is the whole good news of Christianity?”—and it answers both in terms of the word *gospel*. (DeYoung & Gilbert, 2011, pp. 93–94)

Scot McKnight (2011) rightly asserts, “I believe the word gospel has been hijacked by what we believe about ‘personal salvation,’ and the gospel itself has been reshaped to facilitate making ‘decisions.’ The result of this hijacking is that the word gospel no longer means in our world what it originally meant to either Jesus or the apostles” (p. 26). It appears that the point of contention and debate lies not in the Gospel as about personal redemption through faith in Christ, but the larger scope (“wide-angle” as DeYoung and Gilbert note) of restoration as Keller mentions and how the Kingdom of God sets right what was undone by the first Adam. In order to get a better grasp, we need to ask, “What was the good news to those who first heard John or Jesus?” Meaning, if we could put ourselves as a 1st-century Jew and we heard Jesus proclaim, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel,” what would we immediately think Jesus was talking about?

“In anticipation of the long-awaited kingdom, prophesied long ago, the crowds from Jerusalem and Judea came out to the desert and

responded to the call to turn from their sin, confess, and be baptized in the Jordan (Matt 3:4–11). If the king was coming soon, these people wanted to be ready for him” (Swanson & Williams, 2011, p. 71)! To the 1st-century Jew, the Gospel (good news) that John and Jesus preached is that all of the prophecies about the long-awaited Messiah are being fulfilled! Jesus himself, in the synagogue affirms this after he reads the Isaiah scroll and says:

And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:17–21)

In other words, the Messiah is now here and on the scene ushering in his Kingdom. Jesus is the fulfillment and the embodiment of the Old Testament.

The Gospel in an Urban World

So if the Gospel is the announcement that the Kingdom of God is now at hand, what does that mean? And what does it mean for cities? The story of the Gospel is that the culmination of the Old Testament is coming together in the person of Jesus. “The gospel Story of Jesus Christ resolves or brings to completion the Story of Israel as found in Scriptures (our Old Testament)” (McKnight, 2011, p. 50). To back up even further, Jesus brings to completion the story of the Fall in Genesis 3. The first Adam sinned; the second Adam (Jesus) redeemed and set things right from the Fall.² As Keller states, “The gospel must primarily be understood as good news, and the news is not as much about what

² This is where we get into the “here” and “not yet” motif. Jesus certainly offers redemption and reconciliation with God now, but we don’t experience the fullness both individually and corporately until the “not yet” time.

we must do as about what has been done” (Keller, 2012, p. 37). What has been done was that Jesus came into the world as the long-awaited and frequently prophesied Messiah. “The crucifixion-resurrection, after all, isn’t just one event among many in the life of Jesus. It’s the event to which the whole Old Testament looks forward” (DeYoung & Gilbert, 2011, p. 68). Jesus *incarnated* and dwelt among us. He died not only for our sins individually, but did so to bring about redemption and restoration to the world. That includes cities.

If that is the case, then why are cities still both blessings and cursings? As was pointed out earlier, especially in looking at Zechariah, this redemption and in-breaking Kingdom is both “here” and “not yet.” As a result, as followers of Jesus the Messiah, when we are taking part in transformative endeavors in cities we are about Kingdom business and also carrying with us the realization of the “not yet” reality. This “Kingdom business” entails living out the reality of the Kingdom of God *and* pointing people to the reality of King Jesus. Jon Huckins (2012) comments, “When we extend the good news of the kingdom in Jesus, we are not ‘doing’ missions: we are acting as participants in the mission of God, which has been unfolding since the beginning of humanity’s story” (p. 17). Those who are not in Christ can certainly make cities healthier and more livable under the umbrella of common grace, but they are not about Kingdom work. The story is still unfolding as the “not yet” is still to come. Right now we’re active participants in the story as we rely on the “it is finished” work of Jesus on the cross on our behalf.

This is the framework needed in working in cities today to stave off discouragement and a sense of feeling overwhelmed. This reality should encourage us that our work is not in vain. The Gospel is the message that God’s Kingdom is here and among us. Personal and societal transformation is possible because God has established his reign in the finished work of Jesus Christ. The Kingdom points to the reality of God’s imminence and presence. “We do not bring God’s reign into the city. God is already there. He invites us to join him in his activity. In humility we must realize that we will never have all the answers. We cannot meet all the needs. We are not the answer. The ministry belongs to God, not us” (Tiersma, 1994, p. 15).

Chapter 6

The Urban Trajectory of the *Missio Dei*

Missio Dei simply means “the mission of God.” But what is the mission of God? That is more difficult to answer. The blogosphere, websites, and publishing world are replete with conversations about the *missio Dei*. However, there is a divergence of thought on what the *missio Dei* entails as well as its scope. Some would argue that I would be taking matters too far to assert an urban setting for the *missio Dei*. Nonetheless, my hope in this chapter is to articulate that the *missio Dei* does indeed have an urban trajectory to it.

The good news is that we are not left to wholly guess what the mission of God is because much has been written about it over the centuries in the Scriptures. In addition, the mission of God is closely connected to biblical passages and concepts we have already explored, namely the scope of salvation, the nature of the Gospel, and the un-breaking reality of the Kingdom of God. These topics are interrelated and essential in a conversation about the *missio Dei*.

What is the Missio Dei?

Jon Huckins (2012) states, “*Missio Dei* is the Latin theological term that simply means the mission of God. Central to the mission of God is the re-gathering of all the cosmos into intimate relationship with himself” (p. 18). Huckins’s assertion is that the *missio Dei* is about

the “re-gathering” of the cosmos/world/people back into relationship with God. As was discussed previously, original sin impacted much. It caused a rift in humanity’s relationship with God, the ground became cursed, work and childbirth toilsome, Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden, shortly thereafter was the first murder, and then cities “happened” onto the scene. Apart from two chapters of bliss in Genesis, the rest of Scripture is life after the Fall. But God in his sovereignty knew this would take place and already had corrective measures planned, namely Christ. In the beginning, God was a missionary God. God still is a missionary God. He was and is motivated by love. As Bosch (1991) asserts, “Mission has its origin in the heart of God. God is a foundation of sending love. This is the deepest source of mission. It is impossible to penetrate deeper still; there is mission because God loves people” (p. 392).

Missiologist David Leong (2012) explains the origins of the *missio Dei*:

This missionary character is revealed most clearly in the *missio Dei* of the Christian Scriptures, which illuminates a rich Trinitarian narrative about the Father God who creates the world, the incarnate Son who reconciles the world, and the Holy Spirit who empowers the church for the sake of the world. As a missional narrative, the biblical story is rooted in the identity of the *missio Dei*, and the character of God’s mission is interwoven with the story from the beginning to end. This affirmation of God as a fundamentally missionary God is at the ideological core of the *missio Dei*. (p. 40)

Since the advent of original sin, it was and is God who took the initiative to reconcile humanity and the cosmos back to him. Mission begins with God and is carried out by God through his chosen instruments of Israel and the church. God could have left us in our sin after humanity’s fall, but instead he chose not to. “For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:6–8).

Something broke in Genesis 3. That brokenness went far beyond humanity's alienation and rebellion toward God. "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned" (Rom 5:12). Instead, *everything* was affected. We explored some of this previously in the conversations about salvation and the Gospel. The apostle Paul in his letter to the Roman church continues, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now" (Rom 8:19–22). Sin affected all of creation and so does the *missio Dei*.

Leonard Hjalmarson (2010) also notes the wider comprehensive scope of the *missio Dei*: "The nature of the kingdom of God is tied directly to the *missio Dei*. If the mission of God is to redeem, reconcile, and restore creation to its original purpose through the covenant community, then the kingdom of God is manifest wherever this restoration is being realized" (p. 83). In the groundbreaking book *Missional Church*, Darrell Guder (1998) says, "Rather, mission is the result of God's initiative, rooted in God's purposes to restore and heal creation" (p. 4). The *missio Dei* is about restoring what was initially broken in Genesis 3, which includes humanity's alienation from God and the detrimental effect upon the earth and all of the cosmos. Everything, with one act, became out of true, and God, like the master wheel builder, will someday bring everything back into true. That is the *missio Dei*.

The process of the *missio Dei* is already in motion. A follow-up question may be, "What is our part?" Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert (2011) point out:

One of the biggest missteps in much of the newer mission literature is an assumption that whatever God is doing in the world, this is our task. So if the *missio Dei* (mission of God) is

ultimately to restore shalom and renew the whole cosmos, then we, as his partners, should work to the same ends. . . . But what if we are not called to partner with God in all he undertakes? What if the work of salvation, restoration, and re-creation are divine gifts to which we bear witness, rather than works in which we collaborate? (pp. 41–42)

DeYoung and Gilbert suggest that rather than being partners in the *missio Dei* we are simply witnesses. This reveals the tension at hand when the topic is broached, because one side contends that they partner with God to bring shalom to a city while another side would explain that God does it all on his own and we are only witnesses.

The Urban Trajectory of the Missio Dei

Now that we have done some preliminary explorations into the *missio Dei*—regardless of which side you hold—we will transition to the urban trajectory of God’s mission. We will not so much be focusing on the exact scope of the *missio Dei* nor the extent of our participation in it, but rather *where* it has taken root and moved throughout the ages—and continues to do so. But studying the geography of the *mission Dei* is challenging because though there is much written about the *missio Dei*, there has been very little written about the urban trajectory of the *missio Dei*.

“To participate in mission is to participate in the movement of God’s love toward people, since God is a fountain of sending love” (Bosch, 1991, p. 390). Since the *missio Dei* is about restoring that which was broken through Adam’s original sin, then we can break down both the effects of sin as well as the scope of restoration. Adam’s sin brought death, severance, pain, and dysfunction in the following ways:

- Alienation from God
- Alienation from one another
- Alienation from creation (including cities)

As we already have seen in this chapter, Jesus’s redemption is about undoing what Adam did. Paul goes on to write:

Therefore just as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man's act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all. For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. But law came in, with the result that the trespass multiplied; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, just as sin exercised dominion in death, so grace might also exercise dominion through justification leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. (Rom 5:18–21)

In *View From the Urban Loft*, I spent time in chapter 2 exploring this notion of Jesus as the Second Adam, undoing what Adam in his original sin wrought. Using the 2nd-century theologian Irenaeus's "theory of recapitulation"¹ as a base, I said:

What Christ did by his Incarnation, life, death, and resurrection also washed over humanity. Adam and Jesus Christ were not merely individuals but instead, according to Irenaeus, the "fountainhead of humanity." That is why his theory has been called the "theory of recapitulation," from the Latin *capitus*, which means "head." *Recapitulatio* literally means "reheading" or "providing a new head." It's the idea of Adam as the head of humanity in sin being replaced by Jesus as the redemptive head of humanity. Adam brought death to all of humankind and Jesus Christ brought life and light to all of humanity. (Benesh, 2011, p. 18)

This topic comes up again and again for me. I hope to articulate where the urban trajectory of the *missio Dei* took place throughout the arc of Scripture. The *missio Dei* works in the following ways:

- Redemption with God
- Reconciliation with one another
- Restoration of creation (including cities)

Is it a stretch to assert that the location of the *missio Dei* has a definitive urban nature to it? As we trace the development of cities throughout the Old Testament, we are left with mixed impressions—

¹ For more on this topic, read Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*.

and plenty of negative impressions—of the city. Writer Jacques Ellul (1970) does a masterful, no-holds-barred job of describing the unfolding drama of cities. With Cain as the first city builder of note, the next is Nimrod. Ellul posits that Nimrod, like Cain, attempts to counterbalance the ramifications of a curse by building a city. Ellul says, “Once again the city is to follow upon a curse as the act by which man tries to escape the curse” (p. 10). He also says, “We pointed out above that a city marks man’s every success. And a city must also mark the advance against God: she is a tower in order to seize for herself what belonged to God, she is a wall to protect herself against God’s interventions, she is stone blocks to fold within her bosom that conquest” (p. 16).

Many would disagree that the *missio Dei* followed the development of the city because, for the most part, cities were marked by cruelty, rebellion, idol worship, and inequity. But I would argue that cities are exactly where God’s mission comes to light and shines the brightest. There is no doubt to the Old Testament reader that cities received the full brunt of the effects of the fall of humanity from Genesis 3. However, because something is severely broken and dysgenic does not mean God is not at work, nor is his redemptive plan thrown off by our sin and rebellion. In fact, quite the opposite.

This discussion needs to be tempered with the reality of our cities today and the timeframe of the completion of the *missio Dei*. We would be naive to assume the *missio Dei* is finished and that we can usher in its completion and the fullness of the Kingdom of God. We cannot. So where does that leave us in terms of our involvement in cities today? Hopeful? Hopeless? Jacques Ellul (1970) tempers any unrealistic idealism when he says, “Such is the great illusion of many well-intentioned people, who think they can succeed where Jesus failed and who think the world is getting better” (p. 37).

This sober truth hits especially close to home to those who are involved in community development, urban regeneration projects, and urban planning. Yet while we cannot usher in the Kingdom of God, some contend that we are to be about seeking the *shalom* of the cities in which we find ourselves in (Jer 29:7). But speaking for those on the

other side, DeYoung and Gilbert (2011) write, “You can make a good case that the church has a responsibility to see that everyone in their local church community is cared for, but you cannot make a very good case that the church must be the social custodian for everyone in their society” (p. 176).

What is needed is to find that in-between place where we come to grips with God’s sovereign plan of the *missio Dei* apart from us while also acknowledging that God invites us in as participants. In fact, multiple times we are commissioned to “go and tell” about all that God has done. The thrust of the *missio Dei* is that God is a missionary God. God the Father sends his son Jesus to live, dwell among us, teach us about the Kingdom, and then die in our stead, paying the penalty for our alienation and rebellion. “The missional necessity compelled Jesus to be about the Father’s will and work. He *had* to be about his Father’s affairs, in his Father’s house (Luke 2:49). He did only what he saw his Father doing and taught only what he heard from him” (Helland & Hjalmarson, 2011, p. 21). He rose from the grave and passed the baton. “Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you’” (John 20:21). This is reiterated multiple times in places like Matthew 28 and Acts 1. We are the *sent ones*, proclaiming this Gospel and embodying the reality of the in-breaking Kingdom of God.

The crux is found in Matthew 28 when Jesus says his disciples are to reach out to others, “teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you” (Matt 28:20). What did Jesus teach? In the Gospels, we find that most of Jesus’s teachings and commands did not solely revolve around placing one’s faith in him for eternal redemption in life after death. Much had to do with the nitty-gritty, day-to-day life of self-denial, caring for the least and last, and a complete reversal of the power brokers of the age. He said that if one wanted to be first, he needed to be last and a servant. Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount revealed that our posture as followers and worshippers of God entails humility (poor in spirit), being merciful, blessing those who persecute us, turning the other cheek, going the second mile, loving our enemies, giving to the needy, and so much more. In Matthew 28, in his command to his

disciples to go and teach people to be disciples and to obey what he's commanded, Jesus all of a sudden dictates a new radical ethic for how we are to live and our posture in our cities. The Jeremiah 29:7 motif applies now more than ever.

This all sounds strikingly similar to what God communicated through Micah the prophet. "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6:8). Given that Micah was prophesying to an urban nation, this was to be the ethic of how the Israelites were to live . . . *in the city*. In verse 9, Micah addresses the city directly when he says, "The voice of the Lord cries to the city." God goes on to pronounce judgment. The tension that this highlights is in regards to the *missio Dei*. Does the presence of God's condemnation of certain cities necessitate an anti-urban agenda or scope of his mission of undoing Adam's curse? Ellul (1970) thinks so: "For man is not responsible for making the city something other than it is, as we have already seen. There is nothing to be done. And the problem does not change. It is still what it was when, forty or fifty centuries ago, they built up those thick walls of clay whose foundations still subsist. For God has cursed, has condemned, the city instead of giving us a law for it" (p. 47).

The *missio Dei* follows the development of the city. Scripture points out the tension in regards to the city. We find God condemning and destroying certain cities for their rebellion and yet at other times, like in the Mosaic Law, we see God laying out explicit instructions for the way cities are to be marked by justice, mercy, and equity. We must hold both views in tension. If the *missio Dei* is about, as Huckins (2012) noted, God "re-gathering of all the cosmos into intimate relationship with himself" (p. 18), then the city must play a central feature in the regathering and redemption plan. Yet we find the bulk of condemnations and discipline upon God's people as they lived in cities as well as upon cities themselves. But that reality does not mean that God has given up on the city.

In fact, the presence of God's condemnation and discipline are signs of his involvement to rebuke, correct, and bring back into

alignment. If we are to step back and look at Scripture from a wider perspective, we find commonalities between the Old and New testaments with regard to the purpose of the prophets and the epistle writers. For the most part, the prophetic books in the Old Testament and the letters to churches in the New Testament were written because something was seriously out of alignment and God sought to bring this unhealth and sin back into wholeness.

A cursory reading through the prophets reveals that God's chosen people had fallen into sin and walked away from God, his teachings, and their covenant way of life. As a result, God sent various prophets throughout the centuries to teach, chastize, and warn them of impending discipline and punishment. God, through the prophets, was calling his people out of rebellion and back into intimacy with himself. God loved his people and had great plans for them, but their self-destruction through idol worship and following the customs of their surrounding neighbors were bringing such pain and suffering. The purpose behind the discipline was God's love and desire to see his people follow him, worship him, and heed the covenant that would bring abundant life.

In Deuteronomy 28, the Lord makes it clear that a life of obedience for his covenant people results in blessings, even for their cities:

If you will only obey the Lord your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the Lord your God: Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out. (Deut 28:1-6)

This was God's intention for Israel, and we can see the effect it was to have on their cities. As God's covenant people who were to be his channel of blessings to the nations, he set them up for success and

prosperity. However, the Israelites disregarded the Lord's commands and went their own way. God forewarned what would happen if they chose this route:

But if you will not obey the Lord your God by diligently observing all his commandments and decrees, which I am commanding you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you: Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out. (Deut 28:15–19)

Again we see the devastating effect upon Israel's cities. "Cursed shall be your city" (ESV).

When we read the prophets, we must realize they are calling the people back to the blessings of obedience in the context of this covenant relationship. The prophets are reminding the people of their relationship with God. In some cases it is too late, and judgment is pronounced. At other times, God lovingly woos his people back to himself like we find in Hosea.

In the New Testament, the epistles reflect this same reality. They are letters to churches to instruct and encourage, and also to exhort and correct sin. Discipline out of love. Rebuke with the intent of correction and restoration.

The *missio Dei* does not simply speak of a life of bliss in a parallel universe with chubby babies as angels bouncing on puffy clouds. Instead, God has a plan for humanity and even our cities. Where we falter and get off track, God encourages, rebukes, chastizes, and punishes to bring us back into alignment. This regathering may not be neat and tidy, but God is on his mission to restore humanity and creation to the way it was before original sin. At times, God's love comes in the form of a loving blessing. At other times, it comes in the form of a loving rebuke. Other times it may be in the form of punishment.

The first chapter in Paul's letter to the church in Rome reveals God giving humanity over to their depravity and punishing them accordingly.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. So they are without excuse; for though they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their senseless minds were darkened. (Rom 1:18–21)

People rejected God, and as a result he simply gave them over to their sin and depravity. The consequences of their sin then brought on their self-implosion. “Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the degrading of their bodies among themselves” (Rom 1:24). “For this reason God gave them up to degrading passions” (Rom 1:26). “And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind and to things that should not be done” (Rom 1:28). People wanted—and still want—to live life apart from God's intentions. So he simply lets them. The result: self-destruction. We have seen this affect cities throughout Scripture, and history. We see it today. God gives them up to their lusts. But this does not mean the *missio Dei* is offtrack. God is still on his mission, which is most intensely seen and felt in cities.

To call oneself “missional” means to orient one's life around the *missio Dei*. “Missional means to participate in God's mission as he and we work out his will in the world” (Helland & Hjalmanson, 2011, p. 26). We are humbly participants. We are not the initiator of God's mission, nor do we bring it to fruition. “All mission is God's mission and is empowered by the Holy Spirit, who not only leads us but who even goes before us into the world” (Hjalmanson, 2013, p. 8). We participate. We do so by proclaiming the Gospel and living incarnationally the reality of what life is like in the Kingdom of God.

We witness in cities by our *words* and *deeds*. We are about teaching and demonstrating all that Jesus commanded us to do. “Practice both presence and proclamation. Incarnation demands both a verbal and behavioral witness. In 1 Thessalonians 2:8, Paul writes that his team was ‘ready to share not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you [the church at Thessalonica] had become very dear to us’” (McCrary et al., 2013, p. 158).

As a result, the *missio Dei* is most powerfully seen in cities since that is where the bulk of humanity lives. “Missional’ is simply a description of a people or movement committed to advancing and participating in the *missio Dei*. It is a people choosing to extend, engage, and invite others into the story of God” (Huckins, 2012, p. 18). It makes sense that the *missio Dei* has an urban ring and trajectory to it since God will ultimately undo the effects of original sin. Yes, the ground (and cosmos) was cursed, but humanity as the crown jewel of God’s creation was fallen. We are urban dwellers, which means we are intimately tied to where we live. If the *missio Dei* is to reach us, God must enter the city and dwell among us. And that is exactly what he did.

Chapter 7

The Embedded Blueprint for Healthy Urban Life

The Bible is an urban book. Not in the sense that it is a how-to guide for urban ministry nor a resource for how to do urban planning or community development. However, the central stage of where the drama of biblical history is played out is in the city. Most often, the biblical authors write as though the city were just as normative as the air we breathe. No need to elaborate because it is simply there.

For instance, as I sit in the central city of Portland I do not take extra measures to acknowledge all the attributes of the city around me. I am simply present in the city. Living in Portland's second most walkable neighborhood means there almost never is a lull in street life. Bicyclists cruise right below our 4th-floor apartment at all hours of the day and into the wee hours of the night. Last evening as I was walking my dog through the neighborhood, I noticed the constant presence of cyclists, chatting as they rode, and adorned with blinking lights to be seen by motorists. We see this everyday where we live.

Since we live in a corner unit we have a good view of the surrounding neighborhood and city. At times I will walk out onto our patio, lean onto the railing, and watch the city. Below me is always a flurry of activity since the entrance of the public library is four stories below. Across the street from me is a new four-story apartment building under construction, which means I awake each morning to the sound of machinery, yelling, hammers, and moving vehicles. There are

always people out and about walking the streets. Two blocks away is a Whole Foods grocery store that draws a continuous stream of people on foot, bike, and car. City life is always moving and rarely passive.

When Jesus ministered in the 1st century, it was in an urban environment. Often we may think of Jesus strolling along dusty side roads, away from the city. But leading up to the time of Jesus, the world was going through explosive urbanization. “To solidify conquests and advance Greek influence, Alexander and his successors had built new urban settlements and rebuilt existing ones. He himself was reputed to have established seventy such cities. In the centuries that followed, Hellenization became closely linked to urbanization” (Conn & Ortiz, 2001, p. 118). To call it urban in comparison to the megacities today of Tokyo, Mexico City, or Shanghai is a stretch, but Jesus lived in one of the most urbanized regions of the world at that time. No, Jesus did not give how-to talks on community development, urban planning, or ministering in high-density cities, but the bulk of his teachings applied to urban contexts, to make for a more equitable and healthy urban life.

The 20th century witnessed the decisive shift from the industrial to the postindustrial city era and the growth of post-Fordism as an economic engine. However, at the same time, the century included multiple world wars, mass genocide in numerous nations, famine, and rapid urbanization in developing nations that resulted in a billion squatters (Bessenecker, 2012, p. 51).

Ash Barker (2012) in his book *Slum Life Rising* suggests we are on pace to double the number of squatters in the world. “Few Christians seemed willing or able to take notice or even conceive of a world where two billion slum dwellers could live by 2030” (loc. 366). As a result, skepticism has woven itself into the fabric of humanity. Education is not the cure-all. Technology is not the cure-all. Science is not the cure-all. Not to be dismissive of the advancements and benefits from those fields, but the smarter and more advanced we have become also means we have figured out more “advanced” ways of killing and subduing one another. Adam’s sin still reigns.

However, every now and then something remarkable happens that brings out the *imago Dei*. Sometimes these stories receive national or

international media attention, but most often they are done in quiet obscurity. When tragedy strikes, we respond. A certain heroism wells up that is difficult to explain. A couple years ago in Newtown, Connecticut, a man gunned down 20 kindergarten students and 6 teachers. The whole nation was shocked that something like this could happen, especially to vulnerable and innocent children. As a result, many of our nation's citizens offered help.

I recall hearing an interview with a NFL football player who, on his own and without media hype, responded by going to the home of one of the victims. He simply spent time with the family and played video games with neighborhood kids in hopes of bringing a smile to their faces.

When atrocities or natural disasters strike—whether big or small—people often respond sacrificially. Many of these people do not follow and worship God nor would they identify themselves as Christians, but something within them (that *image Dei*) elicits a response. From previous chapters, we know that it is common grace at work. However, something else is at work, too. God has written his law on our hearts.

Inward Outworking of the Law

The first couple of chapters of Paul's letter to the Roman church reveal much about the state of humanity in regard to sin and God's just cause for punishing sin. Previously we looked at Romans 1, where Paul explains how humanity desired rebellion and alienation from God. As a result, God gave us up to the lusts of our impure hearts (Rom 1:24) and to a debased mind to do unspeakable things (Rom 1:28). Part of God's judgment was the natural consequences of what we desired. If we remember, this was how the whole story of humanity began in Genesis 1, where we got we wanted (knowledge) but the result was alienation from God. Romans 2 continues the theme of God's judgment based on our works.

For he will repay according to each one's deeds: to those who by patiently doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, he

will give eternal life; while for those who are self-seeking and who obey not the truth but wickedness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be anguish and distress for everyone who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honor and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality. (Rom 2:6–11)

Paul turns a corner in his argument by declaring that we are held responsible and accountable. The Jews had received the law and were held to the standard of living under the law in this covenant relationship with God. It was the road map for showing them how to live under the care and reign of God, but it also was the “guardian” or “tutor” until Christ came (Gal 3:24). But non-Jews (Gentiles) were also under the law because we also had received it. Paul writes, “When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them” (Rom 2:14–15). In other words, God has placed within the hearts of all of humanity the law. The follow-up question then becomes: What does that mean?

In referring to the law, we need to partition the conversation. On one hand, the law reveals our sin and alienation. “Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions, until the offspring would come to whom the promise had been made; and it was ordained through angels by a mediator” (Gal 3:19). The law then was a mirror to show us our sin and need of a savior. Through the law were numerous archetypes pointing to the promised Messiah and redemption through him. The writer of Hebrews states, “Since the law was only a shadow of the good things to come” (Heb 10:1). This is why Paul alludes to the law as a guardian or tutor to guide the Jews until Jesus arrived. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’—in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal 3:13–14).

On the other hand, the law was a witness and a testimony to the surrounding cities and nations of what it meant to be a people under God. In Deuteronomy 4:1 we read, “And now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live” (ESV). This is reiterated in numerous other places like Ezekiel 20:11 and Leviticus 18:5. God is telling the Israelites that abundant life is found in following the law, which also will be a witness and testimony to the nations. “You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people’” (Deut 4:6). Conn and Ortiz (2001) note, “Yahweh, called his people to a new model for urban life. Israel was to be the exhibition place for God’s redemptive grace in the city and the empires that formed around God’s people in history” (p. 95). Keller (2012) agrees when he writes, “In the Old Testament, mission was centripetal; the flow was in toward the center. Israel was called to be an obedient people, becoming a society that displayed God’s glory for the nations to see (Deut 4:6–9). The nations were called to look and ‘come in’ and worship God” (p. 147).

We find numerous other instances where the people of Israel are called back to God and life under the law, with one of the ramifications being that they will be called blessed by other nations. “Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts” (Mal 3:12). While the law revealed our iniquity and need for God, it also was a practical guide for living in covenant relationship with God.

So what did Paul mean when he wrote to the Roman church that God’s law was written on our hearts as Gentiles? This is a significant progression from Jeremiah 31:33, where the prophet declares that God’s law will be written on the hearts of the Jews. The writer of Hebrews reiterates this, “And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds’” (Heb 10:15–16). Paul, a Jew himself, takes this a step further to explain that the law is written on the hearts of Gentiles.

Jews and Gentiles—all of humanity—are not only stamped with the *imago Dei* but are bearers and carriers of God's law as written on our hearts. So what law are we then talking about?

Since we all have God's law written on our hearts, what part or parts? Is it only that which reveals or exposes our alienation from God (for example, the Ten Commandments)? Or is it also this inward sense of "right versus wrong"? The law instructed Israel how they were to function and be marked by such things as equity and fairness, justice, mercy, and care for the widow, orphan, and foreigner. "In the Torah law of Israel's new covenant society these connections are exhibited clearly. That law, in the deepest sense, was not secular law or civil law, nor was Israel's identity as a people established simply by the nation's attitude toward law and order. Israel's identity was established by the doing of justice, righteousness and love to the cosmic God and to the Israelites' neighbors" (Conn & Ortiz, 2001, p. 99).

In this regard, their witness, as Keller explained, was to be *centripetal*. Is this what it means that the law is written on our hearts? If so, maybe this explains why humanity shines in adversity and tragedy. Maybe somehow, somehow we know what is right and what is wrong. Obviously, this can become distorted, especially when national and city leaders disregard this "inward law" (or some may call it a "moral compass"). Yet even when it is distorted, this internal law on our hearts shines in darkness. In his book *The Seven Curses of London*, James Greenwood, in writing about the horrid squalor conditions of 19th-century industrial London, notes a great irony and paradox in the shadows and dark alleys of street life. While many children were abandoned to raise themselves on the streets, it was those "seedy women" (prostitutes) who would show compassion for these street children and help care for them. Greenwood (1869) writes, "It is curious the extent to which this lingering of nature's better part remains with those 'bad' women" (p. 42). This was in stark contrast to the city officials and leaders. Though tainted with sin, the law is still in our hearts.

I contend that this notion of the "law on our hearts" is the very reason why we have healthy and vibrant cities, that through God's

common grace and working in our hearts we simply *know* what makes for good cities. As cities all around develop, revitalize, and flourish, we can confidently assert that this is directly the work of God in the lives of city leaders. Also, whether one calls it common grace or simply God's sovereign care and reign, we are called to submit to these leaders as Paul explicitly articulates in Romans 13:

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing. Pay to all what is due them—taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due. (Rom 13:1–7)

Some people may be reluctant to take this view because of all the inequities and corruption found in cities—and in some cities more than others. But the presence of corruption or dysgenic features does not necessitate that God is absent. With regard to our walks with Christ, individually, as families, and as churches we are all in process (also called sanctification). Should cities be any different?

A quick mental survey of the history of cities in America reveals that living conditions among urbanites have increased dramatically. Within cities we find the innovations for economic advancement. "Cities have led the transition from the industrial economy of the 1910s and 1920s to the service-based economy of the 1960s and 1970s and the information-based economy that ushered in the twenty-first century" (Abbott, 2007, p. 5). In addition to economic changes, there

were also changes that made cities more livable and healthy. Abbot (2007) writes:

Suburbs and Sunbelt, ghettos, barrios, and everyday neighborhoods have all been part of the metropolitan challenge. The building of humane cities has been the great task and the great adventure of modern America. They have been the centers of persistent problems of economic inequity and of deep gulfs among racial and ethnic groups. They have also been the places with the greatest concentration of human energy for creating new industries, ideas, and solutions to longstanding problems. (p. 7)

Yet, the very presence of unhealthy cities and poverty act as catalysts for innovation, development, and advancement. Former UCLA professor John Friedman (2011) contends, “Without the prevalence of real poverty in the world, there would be no need for an alternative development” (p. 90). As I explored in *Metrospiritual*, many innovations in planning and development were a response to great unhealth and brokenness in cities that such men as Ebenezer Howard, Le Corbusier, and Frank Lloyd Wright noticed. “To remedy the overcrowded and unhealthy conditions of the industrial city, several ideas about a new urban future were brought to light. Some simply call these ideas utopian, but the reality was that with the deplorable conditions many urban dwellers faced these were hopes and dreams for a better future” (Benesh, 2011, p. 52). Whether we call this common grace or, in light of this chapter, the presence of the law in the hearts of all of humanity, something within us is drawing us to innovate, improve, and create healthier, more sustainable, and equitable cities. But in this conversation, Christians are surprisingly absent. That does not mean there are not followers of Jesus who are urban planners, architects, civil engineers, and developers; it simply means we have yet to collectively voice an ethic of improving cities that is rooted in a theological framework. However, God is still sovereign, and in light of Romans 13, common grace, and the outflow of the inward law on our hearts, we continue to move forward.

While at times the church can be divisive and cantankerous, there is still a collective witness within the city that is difficult to dismiss. Christians have been derided throughout history for many things, and at times it was—and is—warranted. However, we also recognize that in some way Christians have been stabilizing agents in cities. If we also apply a “spiritual template,” there may be more going on behind the curtain than we notice. Ellul (1970) cites this when he reflects on Sodom:

And God consents not to separate the righteous from the wicked, not to take the righteous out of the city, not to make some discrimination within the city’s community, but to pardon all for the sake of fifty, then of twenty, then of ten! Thus the solidarity of the city is also made manifest in God’s forgiveness. The entire city is spared when there is one pocket of righteousness, no matter how feeble, hidden in her midst. And this opens up a possibility for the inhabitants to save their city. Not to save it from last judgment, not from the univocal condemnation pronounced against the city, but from its execution here and now, on their particular city, on them its inhabitants, from that execution serving as notification of the final judgment. (p. 64)

Bakke (1997) affirms this view when he writes, “There is relationship always between the *presence* of the godly and the *preservation* of urban communities” (p. 39).

There is this sense of the law within us, of common grace, and even the presence of the positionally righteous that can impact and influence cities. Put these together, and we can begin tracing out an embedded blueprint for healthy urban life. This does not mean that because of these noted realities cities are going to be sparkling examples of prosperity, health, and beauty. It often seems paradoxical.

Last night at bedtime as I was tucking in the boys, we began talking about cities, the presence of church, and what it means for the overall health of the city. My oldest son, 13 at the time, bluntly stated, “Dad, it seems that the cities where God is not present are the ones that are the healthiest.” He was referring to a conversation we had recently after a trip I had taken to Montréal, Québec. His blunt statement was

revealing, true, and false all at the same time. My trip to Montréal was an exploratory trip. One of our group's goals was to immerse ourselves in the city as a laboratory to teach, explore, and discuss basic missiology. At dinner one night, one of the participants who was from the American South (the Bible Belt) confessed that he was shocked Montréal was such a vibrant, clean, and sophisticated city. With some statistics revealing that the evangelical population is around half of 1 percent, the logical conclusion would be that this "God-less" city would be on the verge of anarchy, self-implosion, and chaos. Quite the opposite.

Even though the city of Montréal has quite blatantly rejected the Catholic church and begun distancing itself from the church during the Quiet Revolution (to the point where some of the most prominent swear words are church-related), the city was refreshingly sophisticated and much more proper than many cities in the Bible Belt in the American South where there is a high percentage of evangelical Christians and an abundance of churches. This city that "kicked God out" is truly a remarkable city. Was my son correct in his assessment?

No, but I understood what he was trying to articulate. I took time to explain to him and my other sons some of the topics in this very chapter, namely the notion of common grace and the law written in our hearts. Afterwards I went on to teach them more about God's omnipresence (even though I did not use that term) and how even though people in Montréal were hurt by the Catholic church and rejected the church (and God in the process) that God was still at work in the city and in the hearts and lives of those who live there. To that, God has written the law on the hearts of not only the Québécois, but all of humanity. Obviously, like was noted in Romans 1–2, we either reject this revelation where God gives us over to our self-implosions (whether leaders or the populace) or we respond accordingly. God is at work; the Kingdom is at hand; the Gospel transforms lives and cities; and the *missio Dei* is still in process.

Chapter 8

Commandment, Commission, and the City

Lately this notion of *contextualization* has been at the forefront of my thinking in terms of church planting, urban ministry, and communicating the Gospel. This afternoon I am tucked in the corner of a crowded coffee shop in the Goose Hollow neighborhood in southwest Portland, just across the freeway from Portland's central business district. This higher-density urban neighborhood is an anomaly in that it straddles a transition zone between Portland State University and the affluent neighborhoods that hug the side of the West Hills (officially called the Tualatin Mountains). The patrons of this coffee shop are reflective of this tension and reality. Immediately in front of me are a group of students huddled together reading thick and weighty books on statistics. The rest of the patrons are middle-aged, upper-echelon men and women who, judging from appearances, came here after working out at the high-end and prestigious Multnomah Athletic Club.

I was introduced to this neighborhood while a student at Portland State. During the football season, as students we would get free admission to games, which are held at nearby Providence Park. While the seating capacity in the stadium is a little more than 20,000, I would sit and watch the Portland State football games with about 5,000 other fans. Because of where the stadium is located in Goose Hollow, and it being a more open design, I often would sit and soak in the surroundings of the neighborhood as well. I noticed all the high-rise

residential towers, the sloping banks of the forested West Hills, and the occasional sounds of the MAX light-rail rumbling by.

In light of my experiences at the games and during my weekly times of officing out of the coffee shops here, I have begun to see and learn more about this neighborhood. I have prayer-walked Goose Hollow numerous times and have read about it with great interest. What has become apparent is the need for contextualization when it comes to presenting the Gospel, in church planting, and in urban mission. Keller (2012) states:

Sound contextualization means translating and adapting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture without compromising the essence and particulars of the gospel itself. The great missionary task is to express the gospel message to a new culture in a way that avoids making the message unnecessarily alien to that culture, yet without removing or obscuring the scandal and offense of biblical truth. (p. 89)

I continue to ask myself what it would look like to plant a church here and what cultural issues I would need to be aware of if I were. In the case of Goose Hollow, the built environment influences much. As I explained in *The Multi-Nucleated Church*, “We take in the context of the city we dwell in and let that shape the parameters of how we engage in mission” (Benesh, 2012, p.63). That is part of the contextualization process.

In their book *Tradecraft*, McCrary and Crider (2013) tackle the issue of contextualization. They write about the process in terms of mission.

For the sake of mission, contextualization means adjusting how we communicate the gospel so that people do not need to join a new culture in order to hear and understand the message. This is why Jesus instructed us to ‘go and make disciples of all nations’ instead of saying, ‘go make first-Century, Greek-speaking, Roman-ruled Jews of all nations.’ This is also why Paul was careful to ‘become all things to all people, that by all means’ some would be saved. Our mission is not to export a culture, but to infect existing cultures

with what always proves to be a radically countercultural gospel. (pp. 148–149)

In the contextualization process, we look at multiple issues from culture, the people who live within a certain area, and the built environment. In *Planning to Stay: Learning to See the Physical Features of Your Neighborhood*, William Morrish and Catherine Brown (2000) write, “We comprehend where we live by seeing, identifying, and categorizing the physical features that define our home, neighborhood, and city” (p. 23).

In this chapter, we see several themes emerging. First, contextualization is a pivotal feature in understanding the nuances of church planting and urban mission and also considers context, which hones in on urban neighborhoods and districts. As we communicate the Gospel, point people to the reality of the Kingdom of God, live out the Gospel in our actions, and see our role as participants in the *missio Dei*, we notice—as Crider pointed out in reference to the Great Commission—that we are the sent ones. Jason Dukes (2011) in *Live Sent* addresses this theme of sentness as well, “The Sender (God) delivered His message to us and then writes His message in us and through us for us to deliver to others. He sends us” (p. xiii).

This notion of sentness has an urban trajectory to it. The greatest work of contextualization is most often seen in urban settings globally, which concentrate the highest density of diversity on the planet. As sent ones who proclaim and embody the Gospel, the task of doing so and contextualization becomes even more challenging in the city. But it was precisely the city where Jesus sent his disciples, and when we trace the outward movement of the early church, we see this urban trajectory again and again. The Great Commission had an urban scope to it, but Jesus’s sending of his disciples was more than simply proclaiming his death, burial, and resurrection. It was teaching the nations all that Jesus commanded.

When we mention the Great Commission, we cannot do so apart from the Great Commandment. In many ways, we can assume the

Great Commission includes, necessitates, and assumes the Great Commandment. Let us couple them together here:

Great Commandment—“He said to him, ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” (Matt 22:37–40)

Great Commission—“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’” (Matthew 28:18–20)

Depending on background and experience in the church, most people will lean heavily in favor of one or the other above. Some groups, like the Anabaptists and mainline denominations, emphasize the radical incarnational aspects of Jesus’s life on earth in his healing of the sick, touching lepers, talking to estranged and marginalized people, weeping over a broken city, and calling people to the intent of the law in a markedly different social ethic. Other groups, like Baptists, emphasize the Great Commission, where the bulk of their efforts are on the verbal proclamation of the Gospel and the planting of new churches. But what if both the Great Commandment and the Great Commission necessitate the other? What if practicing Jesus’s teachings actually resulted in living a radically different life? The Great Commandment and Great Commission, when lived out, demonstrate a transformative way to live in cities.

The Great Commandment

Former Coe College sociologist William G. Flanagan (2010) writes of the contrasts in cities in developing nations which begins revealing some of the inequities present, “In every large city, there is an

obvious division between the conditions of the wealthiest and poorest people, but nowhere is the contrast between wealth and poverty more dramatically evident than in cities of the world's poorer nations. The rich enjoy similar living standards throughout the world, but the poorest endure a much more trying level of deprivation in the cities of poor countries" (p. 161). Citing an example from Mexico City, Flanagan reveals, "Because it is one of the largest urban complexes in the world, Mexico City contains many of the problems of Third World cities in exaggerated proportion. It has serious and perhaps ultimately unmanageable environmental problems; it has a deserved international reputation as a wild city; and it provides an enormous stage for rich, colorful social and street life" (p. 163). What is missing from the equation with regards to the inequities found within these cities is a love of God and a love of neighbor, which are at the center of the Great Commandment. While on many levels that is an overly simplistic answer (and purposely so), there is some core truth.

There are certainly healthy and vibrant cities that would be deemed as "God-less." That does not automatically mean anarchy and corruption run rampant, as if the city were being overrun by urban Vikings in skinny jeans and hipster scarves. This is where general revelation, common grace, and God's intent for human flourishing, as stamped with the *imago Dei*, is still a reality. What it *does* reveal is that inequity and injustice come in many shapes and sizes. For a sophisticated First World city like Montréal, the idols look markedly different than cities like Mexico City. In both cases, the idols of the age divert worship away from the living God. When that happens, inequity and injustice—whether white-collar political corruption and embezzlement or violent crimes in squatter settlements—ramp up. Again, it is not so neat and tidy nor black and white. Keller (2012) asserts, "Without an appreciation for God's gracious display of his wisdom in the broader culture, Christians may struggle to understand why non-Christians often exceed Christians in moral practice, wisdom, and skill. The doctrine of sin means that as believers we are never as good as our right worldview should make us. At the same time, the doctrine of creation in the image of God, and an understanding of

common grace, reminds us that nonbelievers are never as flawed as their false worldview should make them” (p. 109). When love of God has been supplanted by anything else, we move into idolatry, and this affects every city differently. “But we approach every culture with awareness that it has been distorted by sin and in particular, the sin of idolatry” (Keller, 2012, p. 109).

Jesus reveals in the Great Commandment that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and then in turn to love our neighbor as ourself. R.T. France (1987) explains, “They remain commandments of God, but they find their coherence in the overriding principle of the double commandment to love” (p. 320). This is the foundation for what a truly healthy city can look like. Also, this is where a good theological understanding of the city comes into play, one that takes into consideration eschatology. While for many eschatology is simply the doctrine of the end times—full of mythical-looking charts, artistic renderings of sci-fi creatures, and outlandish interpretations of Revelation—it is essential. It is not a doctrine reserved for eccentrics living in the middle of the desert in RVs, listening to shortwave radio for the end of the world. Instead, it impacts how we live our lives *now*. Not only that, but it influences our approach and posture with regard to the city.

For many, the theological reasoning behind a lack of involvement in city building is the notion that at the end of days the world will be destroyed, and heaven—including the New Jerusalem—will be on some other planet. Or perhaps the earth will be recreated *ex nihilo*. However, embracing the Great Commandment as an ethic to guide our everyday actions, rhythms, and involvement in the city leads to a more positive view that we can have an impact in cities, in the lives of urban dwellers, and in the future of cities.

When Jesus was articulating this notion of love of God and love of neighbor, on one hand it was strikingly familiar, but on the other it was a radical break from the norm:

Love for God must express itself in love for neighbor. Judaism also taught love for neighbor, but such love does not for the most part

extend beyond the borders of the people of God. The command to love one's neighbor in Leviticus 19:18 applies unequivocally toward members of the covenant of Yahweh and not self-evidently toward all people. Striking in this connection is the ideal of the Qumran community to "love all the sons of light"—the members of the community—and to "hate all the sons of darkness"—all who were outside the community (1QS 1:9–10). Jesus redefines the meaning of love for neighbor: it means love for any person in need (Lk. 10:29ff), and particularly one's enemies (Mt. 5:44). This is a new demand of the new age Jesus has inaugurated. Jesus himself said that the law of love subsumes all the ethical teaching of the Old Testament (Matt. 22:40). This law of love is original with Jesus, and is the summation of all his ethical teachings. (Ladd, 1993, p. 131)

Love for neighbor is wide-reaching. To love our neighbors, whether those we like and love or those in whom there is conflict, is an embodiment and summary of the Law and Prophets. Craig Blomberg (1992) notes, "Jewish interpreters had long recognized the preeminent value of each of these laws; Jesus apparently was the first to fuse the two *and* to exalt them above the whole law" (p. 335). This love of neighbor knows no cultural, socioeconomic, religious, sexual, or political boundaries. The parable of the Good Samaritan is an effective reminder that true love of neighbor requires action even toward and from those who are marginalized and outside our circles of approval and acceptability.

Love of God and love of neighbor demonstrate the incarnation of Christ, bring blessings to the nations, and reveal a radically new ethic of how Christians and the church are to live in the city. Numerous writers and speakers have explored this as a "city in a city" concept. In this framework, the church lives out and embodies this alternative Gospel-centered lifestyle that is both separate from the host city as a missional community but also integrated into the city as salt, light, and a city on a hill. Graham Hill (2012) states in *Salt, Light, and a City*, "In Matthew 5:13–16 Jesus provides three striking missional images of the church—salt, light, and a city. Jesus confronts his listeners with a missional depiction of the church, seeking to orient their understanding of their

purpose in his redemptive plan. The church in mission is the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and a city set on a hill” (p. xiii).

What this trio of descriptors (salt, light, and a city on a hill) reveals is that as followers of Jesus we are so marked by transformation that we embody a different ethic. In doing so, we are thus salt, light, and a city on a hill—meaning we are set apart in a distinctive way to, in turn, be a blessing to those around us. Salt flavors and preserves meat, light allows for others to see, and a well-lit city on a hill is a refuge for weary travelers as well as open, obvious, and not easily hidden. “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16). Embracing and living out the ramifications of the Great Commandment means we are doing so as a city within a city. As we submerge ourselves daily in our cities, we are not to be hidden but to “let our light shine” for the city to see. Our lives are marked by forgiveness, redemption, and transformation. That in turn “leaks” into our neighborhoods and city.

The Great Commission

The Great Commission entails more than verbally proclaiming the good news of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. While this is foundational, we are called to make disciples who are to emulate Jesus. In our teaching and training of new followers of Jesus, we are to teach them to observe all that Jesus commanded. “To ‘make disciples’ is not complete unless it leads them to a life of observing Jesus’ commandments” (France, 1987, p. 415). What exactly did Jesus command in his teachings? If we were to survey the scope of his teachings, we must conclude that he was focused on the life *here* and *now*. That does not diminish the reality of life eternal, but instead enhances the scope in that the eternal and abundant life (John 10:10) that Jesus offers begins *now*—and it certainly includes life after death. This is why Paul was able to say:

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I

prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. (Phil 1:21–26)

The Great Commission hits a strikingly familiar chord. The commission to go into all the world making learners or disciples of Jesus is a continuation of similar tones given to Israel. As George Eldon Ladd (1993) expounds, “So the mission that was initially addressed only to Israel came to be universal” (p. 226). What started in Genesis 12 finds its continuation in Matthew 28 and other passages. Jesus, in the commissioning of his disciples to be salt, light, and a city on a hill, tells them to teach new disciples to *observe* what he had commanded. *Observe* is from the Greek word *téréo*, which means “to watch over, guard” (“*téréo*,” n.d.). In other words, *observe* is more than viewing from afar, but carries with it keeping, guarding, continuing, or preserving as the word is translated in other places in the New Testament.

So we need to know what Jesus commanded. If the bulk of the Great Commission is teaching people to observe, guard, watch over, or preserve all that Jesus commanded, it would be helpful to know what he taught. It is my contention that in doing so, as sent ones and a covenant community—particularly in an urban environment—we help make urban life more livable. This reinforces the city within a city motif.

Since it is beyond the scope of this book to do a thorough exegesis of the Gospels, I will simply walk through the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–6 to highlight some of Jesus’s teachings and commandments from one of his most pivotal recorded messages. Below, I have highlighted some of the concepts he instructed new disciples to guard, keep, or observe as the Gospel began traveling globally.

- The poor in spirit are elevated, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt 5:3).
- The meek of the earth are held in high esteem (Matt 5:5).

- The peacemakers will be called the sons of God (Matt 5:9).
- Rejoice in the face of opposition and persecution. Do not retaliate (Matt 5:11–12).
- We are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, and a city on a hill as we let our good works shine before others. The good works we do point people to God and give him glory (Matt 5:13–16).
- Jesus came not to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. Greatness in the kingdom is directly tied to doing and teaching the Law and the Prophets, which Jesus summarized as loving God and loving our neighbor as ourself (Matt 5:19).
- Do not sin in your anger and let it turn to hatred. Instead seek reconciliation (Matt 5:21–26).
- Do not sexually desire, fantasize, or lust after anyone other than your spouse (Matt 5:27–30).
- Do not be quick to divorce, except in the case of adultery (Matt 5:31–32).
- Have such integrity that you let your words stand without taking outlandish oaths (Matt 5:33–37).
- When wronged, do not retaliate. If insulted, turn the other cheek (Matt 5:38–39).
- Do not hold tightly to your possessions. Do not be materialistic or make an idol of your possessions (Matt 5:40).
- Go out of your way to bless others, even if they oppress you (Matt 5:41).
- Be radically generous (Matt 5:42).
- Not only love your neighbors and friends, but love your enemies as well. Demonstrate this love by praying for them (Matt 5:43–48).
- Give to the needy quietly, discreetly, and without drawing attention to yourself (Matt 6:1–4).
- When you exercise spiritual disciplines, do so without fanfare and false public piety (Matt 6:16–18).
- Love God and his kingdom more than your earthly possessions. Do not focus on accumulating possessions on earth (Matt 6:19–24).
- Do not fret or stress about food, clothing, and shelter. Instead, seek God first and all these other things will be set in their proper place and context (Matt 6:25–34).

Though these are selective passages from Jesus's teaching, they make up the majority of his Sermon on the Mount. This suggests they

carry more weight than intellectual mastery of doctrines and historic creeds. While knowing doctrines and creeds has its place, making disciples as people who *observe* all that Jesus commanded entails so much more. A disciple is an observer, keeper, or learner of all Jesus did, commanded, and taught. “On this occasion, when Christ commanded His disciples to ‘make disciples’ of all the nations, He used a word that is found only three other times in the New Testament. The word is *matheteuo*, which is the verb for of the common word for ‘disciple.’ A disciple is a learner. He is a student, in contrast to a teacher” (Berry, 1985, p.32).

Imagine what it would be like if churches did each of these bullet points from Jesus’s teachings. Now imagine this covenant community doing so in an urban setting. Think of what a radical discipleship and lifestyle this church would have! This would be a city on a hill for all to see. This would become an accurate summary of Matthew 5:16, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.” As we live our lives as disciples of Jesus, the reciprocal impact ought to have a ripple effect on the city. Rather than being known for our bigotry, political zealotry (whether Right or Left wing), division, cultural disengagement, and dysfunction, we could instead be known for our radical discipleship, as evidenced by peacemaking, good works, nonviolence, forgiveness, sexual and marital faithfulness, generosity, care for the needy and oppressed, reconciliation, integrity, and love of enemies. Too often that is not the case. Robertson McQuilkin (1993) laments, “Is there any greater disobedience than a church squandering its resources on itself for twenty centuries, refusing to live and die in behalf of a world for whom Jesus Christ gave His life?” (p. 24).

This sense of discipleship based on the Great Commission is a high standard that we cannot attain on our own. Instead, our righteousness is not self-attained but imputed by the righteousness of Christ. Our lives must become more about surrendering and following him, in light of the Kingdom of God. “The whole core of the message of Jesus revolves around three very basic commands: ‘Repent of your sins.’ ‘Love your neighbour.’ ‘Go and make disciples’” (Simson, 2003, p. 271).

The Great Commandment and Great Commission pave the way for healthy, vibrant, life-giving urban life. While the teachings of Jesus are applicable in all places—whether urban or rural—with more than half the world living in cities, including more than 1 billion slum dwellers, the picture of the church as a city on a hill is especially meaningful. As the church engages in evangelism and justice simultaneously, we can see what a healthy city can look like. Christopherson (2012) quips, “Good works verify; Good News clarifies” (p. 127). Our lives are individually transformed by the Gospel of Jesus, and as we observe all that he commanded, we continuously point people back to him as King. This is to be lived out by the entire church, not simply the leaders. R. A. Torrey offers insight into the scope of this, “Our Lord commands every one of His disciples to go and ‘make disciples’ of all the nations. This command was not given to the apostles alone, but to every member of Christ’s Church in all ages” (Torrey, 1906, pp. 94–95). This provides a great template for how all believers in the city are to live.

Chapter 9

The Urban World of Jesus

One of the common caricatures of Jesus is that he was a rural person who grew up in obscurity in the backwoods of the mighty Roman Empire. Like many rural dwellers, he avoided cities and reluctantly visited only to quickly leave in favor of the open, dusty roads and rolling hills between cities and villages. Many urban dwellers in today's global cities of 1 to 20-plus million inhabitants wonder: How do they relate to Jesus? Can they? Is there a disconnect between the God of the Bible and the condition of *Homo urbanus* in the 21st century?

Cities are dazzlingly and dizzyingly complex from the standpoint of the built environment, culture, spiritual makeup, economics, politics, and the many other layers that make up cities. Every urban dweller has his or her own storyline, and on a daily basis—due to the sheer density of the city—these storylines overlap with a myriad of people who embody completely different cultural backgrounds, education, experiences, personalities, and worldviews. In any given 5-minute period, one may rub shoulders with homeless drug addicts, millionaire hedge fund managers, university students, prostitutes, FedEx delivery drivers, baristas, musicians, atheists, artists, Sikhs, Buddhists, and conservative evangelical Christians. Culture is dense and complex in urban contexts. How does Jesus relate? Or better yet, how can urban dwellers today relate to Jesus?

In his book *House by House, Block by Block: The Rebirth of America's Urban Neighborhoods*, Alexander von Hoffman (2003) writes, "Since the end of World War II, few great issues have perplexed Americans as much as the decline of central cities. For decades, the federal government tried one program after another to stop the inner city from deteriorating. All in vain. First white upper- and middle-class households fled, then African Americans and Hispanic working families departed. As the inner city became the dominion of the poor and the pathological, city-government agencies withdrew like a retreating army" (p. 1). The scope of von Hoffman's book follows the stories of renewal, redevelopment, and gentrification in the inner cities of New York, Boston, Chicago, Atlanta, and Los Angeles.

The trajectory of American inner-city neighborhoods and districts has drastically changed over the past 30 years. "In the 1980s a scholar examining inner-city neighborhoods found only 'islands of renewal in seas of decay.' Today researchers write of 'islands of decay in seas of renewal.' As startling as it may seem, across the United States inner-city neighborhoods are being reborn" (von Hoffman, 2003, p. 2). How? Why the change? With political failure after failure to correct the tragedy of inner-city America, how did we get to the point of reversal and renewal? Citing the transformation of the South Bronx in New York City, von Hoffman reveals, "Despite the enormous problems there, religious clerics, neighborhood leaders, and some plucky government officials believed the Bronx could be saved. They boldly fought landlords, drug dealers, bankers, and indifferent bureaucrats. The most successful efforts, often led by street-wise priests and ministers, were those that did the best job of organizing the people to salvage their neighborhoods" (von Hoffman, 2003, p. 3).

What was it about these "street-wise priests and ministers" that caused them to lay their lives on the line to make their urban neighborhoods safe? If Jesus were a rural God who avoided cities, then what biblical basis did these leaders rest upon? In this chapter, we will traverse the pages of the Gospels to look at the urban world of Jesus, where he visited, and his interactions with and in the city.

Jesus in the City

A cursory glance through all four Gospels reveals that the bulk of Jesus's life and ministry was as an itinerant rabbi, visiting city after city and village after village. If one compiled a list of all of the places where Jesus taught, healed, and ministered, there would be a surprisingly long list: Nazareth, Jerusalem, Sidon, Tyre, Bethany, Capernaum, Nain, Jericho, Magadan, and Chorazin, to name a few. Locked away in our collective imaginations, we assume that Jesus spent most of his life in rural settings, avoiding cities, and think that when he did venture into villages, towns, or cities it was an awkward and alien experience.

When Jesus did visit cities, we too easily assume they were small outposts because we import our modern criteria for cities to Jesus's day. As Conn and Ortiz explain, "To move from the cities of the Ancient Near East to those of Jesus's day is to take a large leap. Cities, after all, change and adapt in function as the social systems of which they are a part change. Scholarship is learning that we cannot judge the Bible's preindustrial cities by industrial city models" (Conn & Ortiz, 2001, p. 116). University of London Professor of Geography Katie Willis (2011) alludes to this in her book *Theories and Practices of Development* when she says, "Another problem with measuring development is comparability" (p. 13). That is as true in the 1st century as in the 21st century.

Another issue arises related to the meaning of words and the process of translation. Words are interchangeable as Conn and Ortiz (2001) note further:

In keeping with this interaction, *cities* and *villages* are easily linked terms in the New Testament (Mt 9:35; 10:11; Mk 6:56; Lk 10:1; 13:22—though recall that the NIV often substitutes *towns* for *cities*). Sometimes what other Gospels call a village (*kome*) Luke will call a city (*polis*). Bethlehem, a village in John 7:42, becomes "the city of David" in Luke 2:3–4,11, perhaps due to its physical proximity to Jerusalem. Bethsaida is a village in Mark 8:23, but in a switch similar to that in Matthew 11:20–22, it becomes a city in Luke 9:10. (p. 119)

As we pore over the Gospels and read the accounts of Jesus, we come across these various descriptors; *city, town, village*. In addition, we contribute our current understandings and experiences into these words. For example, Guangzhou in China is easily viewed as a city with a population of 13 million, but Jerusalem in the 1st century, with population estimates ranging from 40,000 to 200,000 pales in comparison. However, it certainly was a city of significance and importance.

Jerusalem itself was a crossroad where more than 100,000 pilgrims would come for Passover, one of the most important holiday seasons of the year. As the book of Acts says, Jews came from “every nation under heaven” (Acts 2:5), and they spoke all kinds of languages. Jerusalem was far from being isolated from the rest of the world, and the Jews from other locales were not out of place in the temple compound. (Packer et al., 1995, p. 506)

For our purposes, what needs to be noted is the transition in urbanization from the latter years of the Old Testament to the growing urban world that Jesus stepped into. “From the earliest beginnings, the number of people who lived within the cities of the great societies, or whose lives were subject to urban-based rule, was gradually increasing. From its inception as a massive technical device for concentrating and organizing human energy and liberating the power of human imagination, the city was here to stay” (Flanagan, 2010, p. 44). During that time, empires rose and fell with each advancing culture, and the urbanization process advanced significantly. “The ancient city reached its fullest development in Greek and Roman cultures” (Flanagan, 2010, p. 43). Each civilization and empire built on the last one’s culture and influence. This culture was concentrated in the cities and came to a climax under Roman rule. “At its height, Rome turned the ideal of a cosmopolitan world empire earlier conceived by Cyrus and Alexander into a living reality” (Kotkin, 2006, p. 33). Roman rule impacted not only the ancient Near East but Europe as well. “People, products, and ideas traveled quickly through the vast archipelago of ‘urban cells,’ over

secure sea-lanes and fifty-one thousand miles of paved roads stretching from Jerusalem to Boulogne” (Kotkin, 2006, p. 33).

Roman rule brought a disparity of nations, cultures, and ethnicities under one rule. Yet religious and cultural independence were encouraged, as was interdependence. “Most impressive, this flowering of urban civilization was not simply the result of imperial edict; it had a grassroots energy as well. A spirited competition among the various cities sparked lavish new building projects, theaters, and stadia. Rome allowed considerable self-government to individual cities” (Kotkin, 2006, p. 33). All over the Near East and the expansive Roman Empire, urban life was growing and flourishing.

We are inclined to think predominantly of cities such as Rome, Athens, Ephesus, or Corinth in the ancient world because of their size and influence. That is understandable. They would be comparable to New York City and Los Angeles today. Though I live in Portland, Oregon, the cultural and financial influences of New York City and Los Angeles still affect me and others in Portland—and even around the world. Some cities are not only large in size but also in creating culture and spreading influence. Rome and other large cities in the 1st century certainly carried a healthy amount of influence culturally, economically, and politically, but there were other influential urban centers as well.

“The world of Jesus in the 1st century was hardly a story of a Messiah in rural obscurity. There were plenty of places globally where the story could have unfolded, but the Messiah for the world came to the most prominent urbanized region of the world” (Benesh, 2011, p. 98). When we get to the story of Jesus and his birth / incarnation through the womb of a teenager (Matt 2:1; Luke 2:4), we find the drama unfolding in the seemingly sleepy, nondescript *village* of Bethlehem. However, there was more going on than we realize in the events surrounding Jesus’s birth.

Judaism was the only religion to survive the strong influence of Greek ways. Through the translation of the Old Testament into Greek, Judaism actually increased its influence during the Hellenistic Age. But Judaism’s popularity attracted Herod’s envy.

Though he was not of Jewish birth, he spent large sums of money on the new temple in hopes of winning the Jews' loyalty.

But plots and counterplots marked the last years of Herod's reign. In all, Herod married 10 wives, and his many sons fought for his throne. Time and again, Herod promoted a son, discovered a plot, and then killed the son. As he neared his seventieth year, Herod became obsessed with destroying all but his chosen heir. Shortly before his death, he heard the disturbing news that a long-awaited king of Israel had been born in Bethlehem. Herod ordered his soldiers to kill all newborn infants of the Jews, much as he had murdered rivals in his own family. (Packer et al., 1995, p. 168)

Bethlehem, although small, was not merely an isolated, out-of-the-way place. It was part of a large urban infrastructure. The apostle Paul described the church as a body with different parts, and yet all were connected. The same imagery applies to the city as Colin Brown (1975) points out, "Josephus applied the picture [body] of the mutual dependence of the members to the political situation in the Jewish war (*War* 4, 406). When the chief city is ill, the other parts of the land also fall ill" (p. 230). In other words, what happens in one city affects the other. We saw that in Bethlehem, and we see that in our global urban world today where a crash in the stock market on Wall Street sends ripples that impact the economies of cities and countries around the world.

Jesus, born in Bethlehem, was not out of the periphery of view of political leaders. As a result, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus fled to Egypt (Matt 2:13–15). Ray Bakke (1997) adds some perspective to the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus and his first few years, "As our cities swell with immigrants and migrants, I'm reminded that Jesus was born in a borrowed barn in Asia and became an African refugee in Egypt. So the Christmas story is about an international migrant" (p. 29).

After returning from Egypt, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus moved to Nazareth where Jesus would grow up (Matt 2:23; Luke 2:39–40). J. I. Packer, Merrill Tenney, and William White (1995) help us reimagine Nazareth. "The home of Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:39), Nazareth was a

Galilean town within the territory of Zebulun. In Bible times, the city lay close to several main trade routes, which afforded it easy contact with the outside world. At the same time, its position as a frontier town on the border of Zebulun fostered a certain aloofness from the rest of Israel. For this reason, strict Jews scorned the people of Nazareth (John 1:46)” (p. 516). For many of us, when we read the accounts of Jesus growing up in Nazareth, we conjure images of some distant town we have driven through on a road trip where we would comment to one another, “I could *never* live here! This is out in the boonies!” We think of such places as Quartzite, Arizona, or Ontario, Oregon. But Nazareth was hardly remote and hardly obscure.

“Four miles north of Nazareth lay the government’s great regional capital of Sepphoris, rebuilt mostly during Jesus’s Nazareth years by Herod Antipas, one of Herod’s three sons, who ruled the region for Rome. The Galilee Jesus knew was busy with government policies and personnel, economically diverse classes and an entertainment industry that included actors for major productions in a huge theater” (Bakke, 1997, p. 130). Because of Nazareth’s location and trade routes as well as its proximity to other cities like Sepphoris, we can easily conclude that Jesus was not some rural country bumpkin who grew up in the backwoods. Instead, Jesus grew up with access to a wide variety of cultures, ethnicities, socioeconomic groupings, cultural and entertainment amenities, architectural variety, and firsthand knowledge of government and power. Because of Nazareth’s proximity to trade routes and other cities, towns, and villages, this was also a logical launching pad for Jesus to begin teaching in nearby locales (Mark 6:6).

Nazareth was part of a larger region called Galilee. In Matthew 4:14–16, we read of a prophecy by Isaiah mentioning “Galilee of the Gentiles.” It was in Galilee that Jesus was baptized (Matt 3:13; Mark 1:9) and where he began his ministry (Mark 1:14; Luke 4:14). During Jesus’s earthly ministry, he visited Galilee multiple times (Matt 17:22; John 1:43; 4:43–45), performed the miracle at the wedding in Cana in Galilee (John 2:1), visited Cana again (John 4:46), and preached in various towns in Galilee (Mark 1:38–39). In other words, a significant

part of Jesus's life and ministry took place in the region of Galilee. What else do we know about Galilee?

Throughout my adulthood as a Christian, I have heard numerous sermons referencing Galilee, and the common caricature was that of a backwoods redneck, almost primitive, enclave. Preachers, when talking about Peter or quoting him, would do so in a slow Southern drawl insinuating that Peter and others from Galilee were uneducated rural folks from the Appalachian Mountains in Tennessee. The biblical accounts suggest otherwise. "Matthew and Mark tell us Jesus went about all the cities and villages of Galilee (Mt 9:35–11:1; Mk 6:6, 56). That would be an area twenty-five to thirty miles across in both east-west and north-south directions. Josephus tells us there were more than two hundred cities and villages in Galilee" (Bakke, 1997, p. 130). Conn and Ortiz (2001) assert, "Life here was as urbanized and urbane as anywhere else in the Empire" (p. 121). Hardly backwoods and redneck. Conn and Ortiz (2001) continue:

Did these urban influences escape the attention of Jesus and his disciples whose principal ministry was in this region? Not if we judge by a vocabulary studded with references to urban institutions like courts (Mt 5:25) and city market squares (Mt 23:7; Mk 5:56), and with financial analogies built on interest-bearing accounts (Mt 25:27; Lk 19:23) and metaphors of God as an absentee landlord (Mk 12:1–12). Centurion leaders of one thousand soldiers (Mt 8:5) and bureaucratic tax collectors controlling even fishing rights (Mt 9:10; Lk 5:27) dot the Galilean narratives. (p. 121)

How does that recast how we view the region of Galilee? Within Galilee was Capernaum. "Capernaum was the center of Jesus's activities in Galilee and his town during that time. Jesus taught in the local synagogue. It was also the home town of the apostles Peter, James, Andrew and John, and the tax collector Matthew" ("Capernaum," n.d.). Many of Jesus's activities took place here. He not only lived in Capernaum (Matt 4:12–13) but visited there when not living there (Mark 9:33), preached in the synagogue there (Luke 4:31), and healed residents in the city (Matt 8:5–13; Mark 1:21; Luke 4:31–37),

including the centurion's servant (Luke 7:1–10). At one point after news spread of his teachings and healings, Mark said the whole city gathered at Jesus's door to be healed (Mark 1:33). Robert Stein (1996) in his work *Jesus the Messiah* writes about Capernaum, "Although Nazareth, lying only three and a half miles from the major city of Sepphoris, was far from being an isolated rural village, it was less central to the mainstream of Galilean life than Capernaum. Capernaum was also a much larger city than Nazareth. It was an important trade center lying on a major east-west highway and trade route. Probably Jesus moved to this city because it would serve as a better base for his ministry in Galilee" (pp. 113–114).

By now we are clearly seeing that much of what Jesus did was housed and contained within cities. And not just any cities but key cities at the crossroads of trade and cultural exchange. Jesus was all over the map, literally, in his travels from city to city. He visited towns, villages, and cities like Bethany where he raised Lazarus from the dead (John 11:17–44; 12:1), Nain where he raised a widow's son back to life (Luke 7:11–17), Jericho (Matt 20:29; Mark 10:46; Mark 19:1) where he met Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2–10), the district of Dalmanutha (Mark 8:10), and the region of Magadan (Matt 15:39). Jesus said he had to preach in other towns in Judea as well (Luke 4:43–44).

Jesus sent the 12 disciples into the towns and villages of Israel (Matt 10:5–15; Luke 9:6) and followed up by sending out the 72 (Luke 10:1). Jesus "went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities" (Matt 11:1). He stayed in Ephraim (John 11:54). As we can see, Jesus was mobile, and the bulk of his life and ministry were not simply in the in-between places but were, in fact, within cities. "Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him" (Luke 8:1). But what did Jesus see? Not all responses to his presence were favorable. After preaching in some cities, he denounced them (Matt 11:20–24; Luke 10:13–16) and from that list we know that he visited such cities as Chorazin and Bethsaida (Mark 8:22). Jesus also taught about the Kingdom of God in Bethsaida and healed many (Luke 8:10–11).

Jesus's travels and teaching took him to the region of Decapolis. "The Decapolis represented the political and cultural hegemony of the Greeks going back three hundred years before Christ" (Bakke, 1997, p. 131). Ray Bakke (1997) goes on to explain, "Rome merely reorganized and centralized these Greek social and cultural realities, and the milieu spread throughout Palestine and the whole Near East. There was no place to hide from these influences. These populations then were as large or larger than those same areas today, according to various scholars. There was far more to Galilee than shepherds, fields, and olive groves" (p. 131). While in that region, Jesus healed and set free a demon-possessed man who, in turn, proclaimed Jesus throughout the Decapolis (Mark 5:20).

The most central city throughout the Gospels is Jerusalem. While growing up, Jesus went to Jerusalem at least once a year for the Feast of Passover (Luke 2:41). As an adult and during his temptation, he was taken to Jerusalem by Satan (Luke 4:9–13). Throughout his ministry, we see that Jesus visited Jerusalem (Matt 20:17; Mark 10:32; 11:11; John 5:1) as well as participated in the Passover Feast (John 2:23) and the Feast of Dedication (John 10:22). Surprisingly, the Triumphal entry did not mark Jesus's first time in Jerusalem nor the temple. He was found at the temple from time to time (John 10:23), and he cleansed it (John 2:13–17). But after that, something changed; his plan shifted. We read that Jesus set his face toward Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). We know he traveled widely in the region, visiting many cities, teaching, and healing as well as visiting Jerusalem on occasion. But there was a difference. Jesus began talking about how he must go to Jerusalem to suffer and die (Matt 16:21). During the many previous times he had visited the city, there had been no grand procession or fanfare. But when Jesus came to die as the Messiah, his entry was marked by what we call the Triumphal entry (Matt 21:10; Luke 19:28–40; John 12:12–19). From then on, the storyline intensifies, and the picture narrows to this one particular city and immediate area.

While Jesus condemns other cities for their lack of response to his teachings about the Kingdom and the reality of him being the long-awaited Messiah, it is for Jerusalem that he weeps (Matt 23:37–38;

Luke 19:41). Colin Brown (1975) gives us more vivid detail and insight into this account of Jesus weeping and lamenting over Jerusalem by drawing our attention to the Greek: “*teknon*, attested from Homer on, denotes the child in relation to his parents and forefathers All strands of the synoptic tradition contain the word *teknon*. It occurs in the description of the relationship of parents to their children as a picture of our relationship with God (Matt 7:11; Luke 11:13) and in Jesus’s lament over Jerusalem (Matt 23:37; Luke 13:3)” (p. 286).

Jesus not only wept over Jerusalem, but there was a deep longing and love like that between a parent and child. Jerusalem was more than simply a city with walls, a populace, an economy, and culture; it was near and dear to his heart. He wept for the city and died for the city . . . and the world. “Into this urban world came Jesus of Nazareth. And with his coming came the inauguration of God’s urban renewal plan. Babel’s human quest for unity in rebellion is finally fulfilled in God’s gift of unity in ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism’ (Eph 4:5). God comes down again (Gen 11:5) not to judge, but to save in Christ” (Conn & Ortiz, 2001, p. 122).

What is the point? The purpose of this book is to take a look at the urbanity or urban nature of the Bible. To uncover—or more like *rediscover*—urban themes and developments found throughout the arc of Scripture. This is a relatively easy task because the Bible says much about cities, their origins, their development and progression, how God’s people lived in cities, their scope, function, and purposes, and ultimately their outcomes. In successive chapters, the intensity ramps up as the focus shifts from villages, towns, and cities in the Gospels around the regions of Galilee and shifts distinctively to the largest, most diverse, complex, and influential cities in not only the Roman Empire but in the world at that time. “For the next four centuries, the history of urbanism in the West would be written largely by the Romans and those who submitted to their will” (Kotkin, 2006, p. 31).

Chapter 10

The Urban Origins of the Church

Geography is important to me—urban geography even more so. In each of the cities I have lived (Omaha, Phoenix, Tucson, Vancouver BC, Portland), I have spent countless hours studying maps, online and paper, to learn about my home. Most often this involved looking at the area topography as well as transit lines and routes. Now that I live in Portland, an added layer is looking at maps that show all the bike paths, bike lanes, and bike boulevards. The *where* and *how* that maps reveal are important. Maps display how cities are laid out, and one can even see how cities developed and grew.

Another observation from maps is that they can bring to light changing transportation technologies, which are evident in such things as density or radial routes emanating from the central business district. Staley and Moore (2008) in *Mobility First* state, “The contemporary urban area is more dynamic and travel patterns more complex, than in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when the current ‘DNA’ of the transportation system was established” (p. 26). Urban density can show that these areas were built before the automobile and as one leaves the CBD usually the density drops as the advent of streetcars and omnibuses allowed for people to live further out and reduced the need for walkability.

Jarrett Walker (2011) in his book *Human Transit* writes, “The physical design of cities determines transit outcomes far more than

transit planning does. Your particular location in the city, and the nature of the development and street patterns, will govern the quality of transit you can expect. For that reason, one of the most urgent needs related to transit is to help people make smarter decisions about where to locate their homes and businesses, depending on the level of transit mobility that matters to them” (p. 7). In other words, geography is important. How our cities are laid out are quite telling and influence not only *where* we live but *how* we live as well. Jeff Speck (2012) drives this home when he writes in *Walkable City*, “The way we move largely determines the way we live” (p. 55). In some parts of the city, due to density and robust transit options, one can live car-free, while in lower-density parts of the city—that were built with the auto in mind—the only way to get around is the automobile.

Place is important. Maps are simply images and representations of place. Maps reveal the geographic placement of various institutions and cultural amenities in the city. When traveling somewhere on my bike, I usually consult my bike map to plot my route. When I go downtown, I know the quickest routes. When I need to find a restaurant, I will use the map to not only tell me what is available, but I can follow web links from my smart phone to websites and online reviews. Geography is important. As Craig Bartholomew (2011) sates, “Place is creational structure involving space and time, subjectivity and objectivity, self and other” (p. 247).

In regards to maps and cities, one of the features I am most interested in is the geographic placement of churches, whether long-established ones or new churches being planted. For my doctoral dissertation, I studied the location of about 230 churches that were planted over a 10-year period in 7 different cities. In each city, I plotted these churches on the map and broke down the numbers between downtown core, urban (within the boundaries of the city proper), and suburban. My goal and motivation revolved around figuring out *where* churches were being started in cities and ultimately *why*. Why were churches being started where they were? Why do some districts and locations receive a bumper crop of new churches whereas other parts, usually those that are less desirable, have fewer churches being planted?

The geography of church planting is very revealing. Where churches are being started across a metro area does indeed say a lot. It informs us what places are up and coming and what places are dying or downtrodden. There are numerous factors that shape and influence where churches are being planted. I have brought to light only a few, and there are many more still out there. I do not believe it is as cut and dry or a simple answer of church planters planting among people most like themselves in parts of the city where they desire most to live. The data is the data, and there is no denying where the bulk of church planting is taking place. The difficulty lies not only in how that information is interpreted, but more importantly, how it is applied. (Benesh, 2011, p. 80)

This is precisely why when I approach the book of Acts and the explosive beginnings of the church I take interest in *where* the church started and expanded. The reason why geography is important is because we affirm the sovereignty of God. Of all the places globally that Jesus could have come, he did so in a time and place that was the most urbanized region of the world at that time. Because of urbanization, the Gospel of Jesus and his Kingdom was able to spread rapidly along the lines of urban development and transportation infrastructure. The setting was ripe for the explosive growth of the church. What were those factors?

Andrew Davey (2002) in his book *Urban Christianity and Global Order* writes about the impact of the church—regardless of era—that takes place once it becomes interwoven in the urban landscape. “Urban experience and process affect all elements of life—social, cultural, and political; this is usually concurrent with movements of resistance and transformation, the significance of which should not be underplayed. The persistence of faith communities in what many urbanologists have assumed to be a secular urban landscape forces the questions about how such communities adapt to and resist different elements of the urban experience” (p. 90). It was precisely in this context that the early church was birthed in. Davey (2002) also writes that, “Like many urban congregations of today, early Christian congregations were heterogeneous assortments of peoples attempting to bond and create a

sustainable community life, often against a background of misunderstanding and hostility” (p. 75).

The city is more than a mere abstract concept or a mute figure in the background across the pages of Scripture. As we have noted thus far, the city plays a central role in the *missio Dei* and houses the bulk of the drama in biblical history. The transition from the Old to New Testament saw the process of urbanization and globalization take enormous leaps forward. Jesus was far from a rural figure that shied away from cities. We find much within his teachings to indicate the urban imagery and influence that played upon his life and the subject matter of what he taught. The world of Jesus was much more urban *and* urbane than many of us have realized or reflected upon. If there were any doubts or hesitation to the key role of cities within the arc of Scripture, the birth of the church clearly marks a definitive transition.

After the death and resurrection of Jesus, we know that he appeared several times to his disciples and followers. At times, it was a one-on-one encounter, and at other times, it was to hundreds. As Paul writes to the Corinthians:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Corinthians 15:3–8)

We also see this in the first chapter in Acts, “After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1:3). Toward the end of Jesus’s postresurrection stay, he told his disciples to wait. Not in the wilderness, not in the desert, nor on a boat or in obscurity. Instead, he told them to wait in the city, in Jerusalem.

As this was during the time of the Passover, the city was full of pilgrims from all over the region. Not just local regions, but from the far reaches of the known world. In Acts 8, we read of Philip conversing with the Ethiopian eunuch who made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem—a one-way trip of nearly 2,000 miles! That would be almost like traveling from Portland to Chicago by horse and chariot. In other words, people from all over had descended upon the city of Jerusalem for Passover. Acts 2:5 reads, “Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem.” When the Galilean disciples began telling of the mighty works of God, the most astonishing thing was that these different ethnicities in the city, representing a complex myriad of languages, all heard and understood:

And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, “Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God’s deeds of power.” (Acts 2:6–11)

Ray Bakke (1997) comments on this epoch at the beginning of the church: “Acts 2 reports the first hours of the church’s existence as being both international and multilingual. For Luke—the urbane, European, Gentile historian—the story of the early church was meant to document how this Jewish movement from the distant frontier city of Jerusalem could become the faith comprehensive and inclusive enough for the Roman Empire and its leadership” (p. 139). The reality is that God’s intentions all along were for the nations. Genesis 12:3 reminds us that God called out Abram so that he would be a channel of God’s love and blessings to all the nations. It’s just that today our nations are dominated by contemporary, mega “city-states” that influence nations.

The beginnings of the church were not in rural obscurity but in the city. And not just in the city, but particularly in a setting that

represented dense multiculturalism. “The church was birthed as a multicultural and multiethnic urban movement” (Benesh, 2011, p. 101). Not only that, but Jerusalem was not merely *any* city:

In the Bible, Jerusalem is not simply a city. It is the city. It was not just the capital city of the nation of Israel, the site of the temple (and thus the repository of the Hebrew cultic practices), or the center of Jewish faith. Jerusalem was the gathering place of all the systems—the religious, political, and economic systems of Israel, the spiritual center of the Roman world, and the physical abode of the Law. Jerusalem was the city most brooded over both by God and Satan, the city which, in its very name, symbolized the battle between God and Satan for spiritual control. (Linthicum, 1991, p. 115)

The birth of the church was not simply in a random city but in the center of gravity of Judaism with worshippers and proselytes from all over the known world.

While we lived in Vancouver, British Columbia, we got to experience the city hosting the 2010 Winter Olympics. The most memorable aspect of the whole experience was the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the sights, sounds, and activities that surrounded the Games. Since many of the events took place in venues around the city and in the mountains that were mere minutes from the downtown core, much of the social life of the Games took place in the city’s core. On top of that, not only was the Olympic Village downtown, but all of the various “houses” that hosted cultural events for the various nations were downtown as well. One could hang out at the German House, the Russian House, and the Swiss House in close proximity. If you haven’t been to Vancouver, it already is one of the most international and multicultural cities in the world. The Olympics only intensified that. When we walked the streets—whether around Robson Square or down Granville Street—or took in sites like the Olympic Cauldron, we often would see athletes and visitors from all over the world mixed in with the already international cosmopolitan city.

This had to be similar to what it was like in Jerusalem as we read in the beginning of Acts. Tens of thousands of international visitors¹ from a myriad of cultural backgrounds speaking a cacophony of languages. When the church was birthed at Pentecost, the ripple effect eventually circled the globe. Immediately, the Good News of Jesus Christ and his Kingdom was translated across linguistic and cultural lines. While it started in the Jewish capital, it quickly transitioned to the Gentile world as these pilgrims traveled home, taking the Gospel with them. Imagine if the athletes and visitors to the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver all returned to their home countries as ambassadors, missionaries, or sent ones of Jesus the Messiah, with the Gospel spreading from Vancouver to Berlin, to Moscow, to Beijing, to London and beyond.

Though the church was birthed in Jerusalem, the focal point in Acts and the rest of the New Testament shifted dramatically and decisively from the Jewish world to the non-Jewish world—from Galilee to Galatia, from Chorazin to Corinth. That is not to be dismissive of all of the Greek- and Roman-influenced cities in regions surrounding Jerusalem that Jesus traveled through, but Acts marks a definite transition. The great Roman infrastructure allowed for this rapid and thorough out-migration of the Gospel to take place. This shift also sets the course for the bulk of the rest of the New Testament. Epistles would eventually be penned to Christians in such cities as Ephesus, Rome, Corinth, and other Euro-centric cities. This also marks the flashpoint of tension as the church translated beyond the ethnic and sociopolitical boundaries of the Jewish nation.

As the church began its translation process from one culture to another in new cities, it began adopting forms and expressions that gave it a distinctive character. “The new Christian communities had counterparts in many of the small social, ethnic, and religious groups or associations found in those cities. These urban social forms, such as the assembly (*ekklesia*) and the household (*oikos*) were adapted in the forms and language of the Christian community” (Davey, 2002, p. 77). Much of the tensions resulted in discerning what needed to be translated,

¹ Some speculate that there could have been 100,000 pilgrims and visitors there.

what needed to be negated, and what universal biblical truths transcended time and culture. Conversely, the church today still struggles with this tension as the Gospel moves from culture to culture, city to city, worldview to worldview, and generation to generation. If one were to survey much of the banter in the blogosphere and social media today, it would reveal that at the heart of numerous controversies and name-calling, the issues of translating, adopting, adapting, and contextualizing are still the source of much discourse and dissension.

Recently, I was part of leading a 3-day training event called *Tradecraft Training*² through the PDX Loft. The purpose of this training was to teach basic missionary skills such as contextualization, cultural exegesis, and mapping. Using Portland as our laboratory, we endeavored to flesh out these principles and concepts. On Saturday, we spent the day along the North Williams corridor in inner North/Northeast Portland. Once the heart of the African American community, the area has seen extensive gentrification and an influx of middle-class whites who largely belong to the creative class. For our afternoon session, we met at North Portland Bible College, which launched 30 years ago as a training center for pastors and lay people for black churches in the area. But the neighborhood is no longer predominantly African American, which is reflected in the student body at the small college.

In using the neighborhood as the backdrop for our conversation, participants quickly observed the challenges of planting a church for the historic inner-city black community and for the new people moving into the neighborhood who are investing in and fixing up the old homes. In the neighborhood, corner convenience stores have given way to high-end organic grocery stores, unkempt taverns to trendy brew pubs, and hair salons that cater to the black community to hip yoga studios. What does it look like to do and be the church among both groups of people? How does a historic black church transition and translate to the demographic shifts taking place in the neighborhood?

²This training is built off the book *Tradecraft: For the Church on Mission* by McCrary et al. (2013).

How do new white hipster churches translate to incorporate the black community?

The changes and translation that took place after the church was birthed in Acts reflected a significant and abrupt change because no longer was identity as God's people about one's Jewishness. But cultural translation of the Gospel today is still arduous and full of pitfalls. Ambrose University professor William McAlpine (2011) comments, "The gospel is never expressed into thin air, but always within a cultural context, thus cultures not only need to be evangelized but the gospel needs to be inculturated" (p. 23). Building off that idea, McAlpine (2011) continues:

At some point, translation must take place, but it must go beyond a more obvious, superficial, linguistic level into the deeper intrinsic cultural aspects of function and meaning. In order to discover function and meaning, symbols and other cultural texts must be understood and intentionally incorporated into the translation process. Effective translation is dependent not only on an accurate exegesis of the texts in which the gospel has been invested but also requires an exegesis of the culture to which it is being conveyed. (pp. 23–24)

We find a snapshot of this tension in Paul's letter to the Galatians. Paul opposes Peter because Peter was waffling in his commitment to translate the Gospel to the Gentiles. In Acts 10, we read that God specifically told Peter that the Gospel was for all people and all nations and ethnicities. God tells Peter to welcome the Gentile Cornelius, whom God had sent. We read:

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all. That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. We are witnesses to all that he did

both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” (Acts 10:34–43)

Yet, what we find in Galatians is that Peter began retracing his steps on the belief that the Gospel was for all the nations. Paul writes of this account:

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Gal 2:11–14)

Bakke (1997) observes, “It wasn’t until his own cross-cultural episode with Cornelius that the coin dropped and the lights came on for Peter. After all he had been through, he was still struggling with people who brought ham sandwiches to the church picnic (forgive my colloquialism). Deep down he still cared deeply about his own culture. He did not relish becoming a minority in his own church. He hadn’t resolved completely his own ethnic and cultural identity” (p. 144). When the Gospel comes into contact with the various ethnicities at hand in the then-Roman world (and beyond), the struggles and tension mounted. McAlpine (2011) asserts, “Virtually since its inception, the church, either by choice or necessity, has grappled with the degree and manner in which it should engage the culture of its day” (p. 12).

Translation: The birth of the church took place in a complex multicultural urban world. The Gospel spread to the leading urban

centers of the day and served as the launching pad the past 2,000 years to the rest of the world. The Gospel would eventually reach such nations, cities, and empires ranging from China along the Silk Road in the 7th century to modern Chinese cities like Shanghai, Beijing, and Hong Kong. The Gospel went from Rome eventually to the modern cities of London, Montréal, Toronto, New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. The Gospel would spread to Rio de Janeiro, Mexico City, and Santiago in Central and South America. The Gospel would move across other Asian cities like Baghdad, Mumbai, Kuala Lumpur, Singapore, and Tokyo. The Gospel was destined for the city since it is the good news about Jesus setting things right through his death, burial, and resurrection. Cities are where most of the world's inhabitants now live, and that number continues to rise.

Since no single culture embodies a completely non-nuanced encapsulation of the Gospel and expression of the church, it means every culture has blind spots. At the same time each culture, like a multifaceted diamond, also reveals a beautiful expression of the Gospel and the church. Collectively and globally, the church universal offers a clearer glimpse of the Gospel and church. Phil Wood and Charles Landry (2007) in their book *The Intercultural City* write about the phenomenon of the benefits of diversity. They say, "The process of crossing boundaries and trying to understand the 'Other' can broaden the mind, encourage different perspectives and lead to hybrid inventions. It can generate a special cross-cultural creativity" (p. 5).

Urban infrastructure and urban density allowed for the rapid spread of the Gospel from city to city and within cities. Even in modern books on urban planning, there is an admittance of the benefits that pre-auto and ancient cities had. This revolved around density and walkability. As Chye Kiang Heng and Lai Choo Malone-Lee (2010) observe, "Many now see the pre-industrial traditional cities as offering viable models of urban development, whose size was decided by comfortable walking distance, urban forms organized in fine grain networks composed of narrower streets and public spaces, and urban life richly intertwined in an organic way across a relatively dense and compact urban fabric" (p. 42). While writing from the vantage point of today's Asian megacities, these authors capture the point that was inherent in the birth of the church. It was the walkability, urban

infrastructure (fine-grain networks), and urban life that proved to be fertile conditions for the birth and explosion of the church.

Many have written over the years that one of the features that allowed for the rapid spread of the Gospel was the universality of the Greek language in the Mediterranean region. The Gospel was able to spread rapidly along this common linguistic line and rightly so. The point that I am making here is that undergirding the transmission of the Gospel far and wide was indeed the presence of this urbanized region and infrastructure. This allowed for the Gospel and the church to quickly move from city to city. Given the fact that at the time of the birth of the church there were pilgrims from all over the known world indicates that people, far and wide, had access to Jerusalem, and in returning to their home countries took the Gospel with them. Every time the Gospel moves to a new city and new churches are birthed, it involves a translation process. Historically, this has been a source of tension in today's Western church in the same way we read of the difficulty in moving from Judaic to Hellenistic worldviews:

Unfortunately, one of the most serious wounds the church has historically suffered has been self-inflicted by her choice to neglect or minimize the significance of culture, ignoring the vital position it occupies in the fulfillment of her God-given mission. The lamentable result has been a tendency within the Western church to perceive the Euro-American expression as the most authentic one, the one that more accurately mirrors the Scriptures—fostering a mindset that cultures outside that context are incapable of offering added value to the dialogue or to any evangelistic endeavor. (McAlpine, 2011, p. 14)

The church had urban origins. This proved to be strategic as the world was rapidly urbanizing at that point in history. Had Acts 2 taken place 400 years earlier, the impact would have been relegated. If it had taken place 400 years later, the movement would have been muted as the Roman Empire fell to invaders and Europe was thrust into the Dark Ages (or Early Middle Ages). The *when* and *where* of the birth of the church in the 1st century was essential!

Chapter 11

The Expansion of the Church and Translation of the Gospel

I greatly enjoy immersing myself in a city's culture. Recently, I had the opportunity to join a group for a few days in exploring Montréal's history, unique Francophone culture, and spiritual needs. On an unseasonably mild fall evening, we walked down a bustling street lined with cafes, pubs, and clubs with noise and people spilling out onto the sidewalks of Ville-Marie.¹ We walked around the McGill (University) Ghetto,² exploring the campus with its rich architecture, and trekked by the edge of UQAM (Université du Québec à Montréal). I especially enjoyed our stop at Molson Stadium, the home field for the Canadian Football League's Montréal Alouettes. Walking on the field with the stadium lights on was a *Field of Dreams* moment for me.

As a self-professed nerd and bookworm, my highlights always include visiting university campuses. Over the next few days, being the introvert I am, I would regularly find a place to simply sit, watch, listen, and pray. Sometimes I would chat with English-speaking students. I

¹ "This vast, bustling downtown area of Montréal is not only an attraction site for tourists, but also a home for many residents, businesses and organizations spread over eleven districts" (Smith, 2008, p. 6).

² The McGill Ghetto is a densely and distinctly residential area comprised mostly of row-housing mainly for the student population" (Smith, 2008, p. 9).

find something beautiful, heart-stirring, and fascinating about urban campuses.

In Portland, from the window at my office, I get to look down three stories to an open plaza ringed with restaurants and cafes. Periodically, the streetcar plods through the plaza as it cuts across campus. Even more common is the sound and vibration of the MAX light-rail train that rumbles by on both sides of the block and our building.

Immersion in a city is paramount to me for understanding it. Immersion helps me formulate my thinking. Context is one of the most influential factors when I write. How could I write about the city and vibrant streetscapes from a remote mountain cabin or at a chain coffee shop at a strip mall on the city's periphery? The city demands that I take notice and that I am cognizant of the cultural cues I consciously and subconsciously pick up. The *where* influences transmission of thoughts, ideas, and concepts. It is more than a passive background—the city is the medium.

In the last chapter, I looked at the urban origins of the church. Again, much was influenced by the city in terms of where the church spread, how it spread, and even the rapidity with which it spread. In this chapter, I will spend more time exploring the expansion of the early church, but I will do so from a different vantage point. Not long ago, as I was poring over maps of Paul's missionary journeys, I traced his progression from Jerusalem and Antioch westward. From Asia to Europe. West and not east. Earle Cairns (1996) notes, "A consideration of the maps of his journeys reveals the advance of the gospel under his preaching along a great *semicircle* reaching from Antioch to Rome. Paul adopted as a basic principle the expansion of the gospel to the West, and it must have been with delight that he first caught sight of his goal, Rome, even if it was as a prisoner of the Roman government" (p. 66). Those early missionary journeys would set the church on a trajectory that would influence the next 2,000 years of church history.

Context is important and influences much. When we looked at Jesus, we noticed that the city³ influenced his teachings and use of parables. The birth of the church was marked by its location in Jerusalem and the presence of spiritual pilgrims from all over the known world. When we look at the birth of the church and its successive outward expansion, we see that the church hopped from city to city, covering a lot of territory. In this chapter, rather than recounting each and every city that Paul and his travel companions visited as he journeyed westward, I will hone in on one of his letters and look at how it acts as a microcosm of the outward expansion of the early church, including many of the cultural difficulties encountered in contextualizing new churches and the Gospel from city to city and culture to culture. Cairns (1996) points out this tension that Paul and others in the church struggled with:

The early Jewish-Christian church seemed slow to apprehend the universal character of Christianity even though Peter had been instrumental in giving the gospel to the first Gentile converts. It was Paul who had by revelation of God the largeness of vision to see the need of the Gentile world and to spend his life carrying the gospel to the world. As no other in the early church, Paul realized the universal character of Christianity and dedicated himself to the propagation of it to the end of the Roman Empire. (Rom. 11:13; 15:16) (p. 64)

Paul was comfortable and familiar with urban life. Some have attempted to point out the contrast between Jesus and Paul by asserting the rural nature, upbringing, and worldview of Jesus in comparison to the urbane and cosmopolitan framework of Paul. As discussed already in this book, Jesus's upbringing was in a more urban setting than most people realize. Cairns (1996) highlights Paul's upbringing when he writes, "Paul grew up in an urban cosmopolitan culture" (p. 66). Paul did grow up in the city and was influenced by it. Others have pointed out how this influenced his writings, "the metaphors of Paul spring from

³ In my attempt to highlight urban themes, I do not mean to depreciate the rural or agrarian life. Agricultural analogies and examples are also woven into the teachings of Jesus.

city life” (Packer et al., 1995, p. 553). As not only a Jew, but also a Roman citizen, Paul was uniquely positioned to be a mouthpiece of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

“The Christian faith was born in a period of political transition” (Clouse et al., 1993, p. 18). Paul, like a great military strategist, utilized the massive Roman infrastructure and his clout as a Roman citizen to advance the Gospel. “Paul also thought in terms of areas that could be reached from *strategic* urban centers. He always started his work in a new area in the most strategic city and used the converts to carry the message to the surrounding towns and countryside” (Cairns, 1996, p. 67). A cursory journey through the book of Acts reveals much of Paul’s travels and missionary adventures. Journey after journey and city after city, Paul methodically moved westward toward Europe and Rome. At one point, there was a decisive moment that for centuries would affect the trajectory of the Gospel and church history. Acts 16 records this event:

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them. (Acts 16:6–10)

J. I. Packer, Merrill Tenney, and William White Jr. (1995) make note of this, “When the evangelistic party (directed in some unspecified way by the Holy Spirit—Acts 16:6–8) reached Troas and stood gazing across the narrow strait, they must have pondered the prospect of advancing their campaign to what is now the European mainland. The decision came when ‘a vision appeared to Paul in the night; There stood a man of Macedonia . . . saying, Come over into Macedonia and help us’ (Acts 16:9). Paul’s response was immediate. The party set sail for Europe” (p. 560). God pushed Paul and his companions to Europe. At

the same time, Paul was driven to see the Gospel penetrate the apex of the Empire—Rome. Even though there were and would be churches on three continents—Africa, Asia, and Europe—Paul still had his focus on Rome. Ironically, he wouldn't reach Rome until later, as a prisoner. "The book of Acts ends with the apostle imprisoned in Rome, a period that could have lasted as long as two years, A.D. 60–62. During this time Paul composed the prison epistles—Philippians, Philemon, Colossians, and Ephesians" (Clouse et al., 1993, p. 37).

The Gospel was advancing, and churches were springing up in Asian, African, and European cities, large and small. This was more easily possible because the whole region was under Roman rule, which allowed for rapid movement. It is not an understatement that, "The Roman world order was the greatest single influence upon the life of the Jews in the New Testament era" (Packer et al., 1995, p. 174). During the two years that Paul was in Rome under house arrest, he was able to write a number of letters to churches and even a letter to a friend, Philemon. The letter to Philemon is intriguing because it reflects well the notion of the expanding church along with the challenges of translating the Gospel from culture to culture.

Paul's imprisonment was not like how we envision prison. As a Roman citizen, he was under house arrest, which meant he could receive visitors and enjoy certain freedoms. One such visitor was a runaway slave named Onesimus. We don't know whether he and Paul had previously met, but we do know that Paul was instrumental in his conversion (Phlm 10). We also know that Onesimus was a runaway slave, and his master was Philemon, a Christian. We learn of Onesimus's estranged status as well as thievery. Maybe that was what compelled him to leave Colossae and make the long trek to Rome. "It may not be too fanciful to think of a headstrong youth with an eagerness to see the world, restive under the restraints of slave-status in the small town of Colossae, tempted to steal his passage money to Rome, and once there having repeated the experience of the Prodigal Son, seeking out his master's old friend Paul, as the one sure refuge for a worried and frightened boy" (Neil, 1962, p. 503).

While imprisoned, Paul writes a letter to the church in Colossae. Simultaneously he writes a personal letter to Philemon in regards to this runaway slave, Onesimus. “For Colossians and Philemon were, to all appearances, written at the same time and place, sent to the same place, carried by the same messenger or messengers. Of the six companions of Paul who send their greetings in Colossians, five send greetings in Philemon. Apart from these, Archippus is mentioned in both, and Onesimus evidently reaches his destination at the same time as both letters” (Bruce, 1984, p. 191). In Colossians 4, we observe that Paul even sends Onesimus back with others carrying these letters. “Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts; he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. They will tell you about everything here” (Col 4:7–9). “Colossae, the home of the church to which Paul’s letter to the Colossians was addressed, was a city in the Lycus valley of Western Anatolia (Asia Minor). Two neighboring cities, also in the Lycus valley, are mentioned in the letter—Laodicea and Hierapolis (Col. 2:1; 4:13, 15–16)” (Bruce, 1984, p. 3). Because the church met at Philemon’s house, we can assume he was wealthy to have a large house and also a slave owner (Deibler, 1983, p. 769).

Paul is writing a letter to a church that he did not start as F. F. Bruce (1984) explains:

The Lycus valley was not evangelized by Paul himself; it is plain from Col. 2:1 that he was not personally acquainted with the churches there. He had certainly met individual members of those churches like Philemon of Colossae, who indeed appears to have been one of his converts (that is the natural sense of his reminder to him in Philem. 19b: “you owe me your very self”). The preaching of the gospel and planting of churches in the Lycus valley were evidently the work of Epaphras, whom Paul calls his “fellow-slave” and “fellow-prisoner.” (p. 14)

The church was continuously expanding, and we know Paul was not the only one starting new congregations in new cities. Each new city and each new circumstance that the church was birthed in was cause for reflection and then served as a catalyst for Christians to figure out what their new identities in Christ meant. The translation process was difficult and at times scandalous. The letter to Philemon shows this fluid dynamic.

The crux of the tension lies in the fact that not only did Onesimus run away from Philemon, but that he also stole from his master. In the interim, Onesimus had become a Christian, which added a whole new level to the dilemma. “The personal epistle to Philemon is concerned with the problem of the Christian master and the slave who became a Christian” (Cairns, 1996, p. 68). Paul institutes a radical new ethic in the way he implores Philemon to accept and treat his runaway slave. William Barclay (1975) points out the implications of this act:

There were in the Roman Empire 60,000,000 of them [slaves] and the danger of revolt was constantly to be guarded against. A rebellious slave was promptly eliminated. And, if a slave ran away, at best he would be branded with a red-hot iron on his forehead, with the letter F—standing for *fugitivus, runaway*—and at worst he would be crucified to death. Paul well knew all this and that slavery was so ingrained into the ancient world that even to send Onesimus back to the Christian Philemon was a considerable risk. (p. 270)

Paul’s words sparked controversy for the 1st-century reader and still do for the 21st-century reader, post-modern-day slavery. Paul was proposing to Philemon to let his faith in Christ dictate a break from contemporary culture. As a master to Onesimus, he had the right to deal harshly with him, but Paul implores him to do otherwise.

This highlights the radical nature of the Gospel for both ancient and modern hearers. First, slavery then was different than that of the African slave trade. In the 1st century, slaves had rights, could own land, and even could bring their masters into court for mistreatment. Slavery was not permanent, nor predicated on forceful abduction or based on

ethnicity. When the Gospel began penetrating society, it began to reorient and turn things upside-down:

What Christianity did was to introduce a new relationship between man and man, in which all external differences were abolished. Christians are one body whether Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free men (1 *Corinthians* 12:13). In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free man, male nor female (*Galatians* 3:28). In Christ, there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free man (*Colossians* 3:11). It was a slave that Onesimus ran away and it was as a slave that he was coming back, but now he was not only a slave, he was a beloved brother in the Lord. (Barclay, 1975, p. 272)

To the modern reader, there is a tinge of scandal. Why didn't Paul seek to abolish slavery? Why didn't he tell Philemon to simply set Onesimus free and seek to free all slaves? One commentator picks up on this tension:

It may be wondered in these days why St. Paul at no point questions the right of Christians to own slaves. Neither here, nor in his letters to the Ephesians (*Eph.* 6:5–9) and the Colossians (*Col.* 3:22–4:1), does he say what may seem to us now to be obvious, that slavery as an institution is incompatible with the Gospel. Part of the reason is that the lot of a slave in Paul's day was generally better than that of millions of peasants and industrial workers in the world today. Slaves might not only be trusted members of a household, but might also hold responsible positions in business, public administration and the professions. (Neil, 1962, p. 504)

Barclay (1975) weighs in on this topic when he writes:

It may well be that Paul accepted the institution of slavery because it was almost impossible to imagine society without it. Further, if Christianity had, in fact, given the slaves any encouragement to revolt or to leave their masters, nothing but tragedy could have followed. Any such revolt would have been savagely crushed; any slave who took his freedom would have been mercilessly punished; and Christianity would itself have been branded as revolutionary and subversive. Give the Christian faith, emancipation was bound to come—but the time was not ripe; and to have encouraged slaves

to hope for it, and to seize it, would have done infinitely more harm than good. There are some things which cannot be suddenly achieved, and for which the world must wait, until the leaven works. (p. 271)

As the Gospel rapidly spread from city to city, continent to continent, nation to nation, culture to culture, and worldview to worldview, it was essential for the early church to begin hammering out her theology on the fly. Christians had to quickly begin wrestling with how the Gospel penetrated every nook and cranny of their daily lives, whether Jews, Romans, Ethiopians, Macedonians, or Cretans. When it came to slavery, “Christianity in the early days did not attack slavery; to have done so would have been disastrous. But it introduced a new relationship in which the human grades of society ceased to matter” (Barclay, 1975, p. 272). Instead, Paul admonishes Christians to remain as they are. He pens these words to the urban church of Corinth:

However that may be, let each of you lead the life that the Lord has assigned, to which God called you. This is my rule in all the churches. Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything. Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition now more than ever. For whoever was called in the Lord as a slave is a freed person belonging to the Lord, just as whoever was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of human masters. In whatever condition you were called, brothers and sisters, there remain with God. (1 Cor 7:17–24)

Whenever the Gospel comes in contact with culture, it always entails translation and contextualization. Added to that already difficult task is the presence of the city. Not simply the city as a collection of buildings, roadways, and a homogenous populace, but sheer complexity due to the multicultural, multiethnic, multilinguistic, and pluralistic

nature of urban centers. The Gospel and the life of the church are to be contextualized in setting after setting, even within the same city. While we are truly all one in Christ, each group of people carries aspects within their culture that makes contextualization both easy and difficult due to cultural baggage. How quickly and widely the early church spread was and is impressive. The letters to the various churches, as we briefly observed, reveal the tension and joy of this contextualization process. At times, the churches got it right; other times they completely got off track.

In the case of Onesimus and Philemon, the modern reader may wonder what ever happened when Paul sent Onesimus back with these two letters and his blessings. Did the Gospel transform Philemon to the point where it affected how he was a master? Did he rebuke Onesimus? Did he have Onesimus crucified for his rebellion and thievery? The good news is we have insight into the eventual outcome:

Let us move on about fifty years. Ignatius, one of the great Christian martyrs, is being taken to execution from Antioch to Rome. As he goes, he writes letters—which still survive—to the Churches of Asia Minor. He stops at Smyrna and writes to the Church at Ephesus, and in the first chapter of that letter, he has much to say about their wonderful bishop. And what is this bishop's name? It is *Onesimus*; and Ignatius makes exactly the same pun as Paul made—he is Onesimus by name and Onesimus by nature, the profitable one to Christ. It may well be that the runaway slave had become with the passing years the great bishop of Ephesus. (Barclay, 1975, p. 275)

The case study of the letter to Philemon and some of the circumstances surrounding the storyline reveal a snapshot of the expansion of the early church after Pentecost. It displays how quickly and widely the Gospel spread. Also, what we find in this personal letter is the tension of contextualization as well as the arduous task of translating and adapting the Gospel from city to city and culture to culture. As urban dwellers immersing ourselves in the city today, we are called to do likewise, whether in Montréal, Portland, Oslo, Shenzhen, or Curitiba. May we passionately spread the Gospel and continue to be about seeing the church rapidly expand by utilizing the urban infrastructures of our cities.

Chapter 12

The Epistles and the Built Environment of the City

Downtown by Robert Fogelson is a revealing book addressing the seismic changes taking place in what has been dubbed “downtown” in the United States. While other countries have used terms like “city center” to describe the hearts of their cities, we have developed our own here—*downtown*. Fogelson (2001) writes, “A uniquely American phenomenon, downtown thrived everywhere in urban America, even in Los Angeles, now regarded as the archetype of the decentralized metropolis, where late as the mid 1920s nearly half of its residents went downtown everyday” (p. 2). The subtitle of Fogelson’s book reveals the scope of his research and writing: *Its Rise and Fall, 1880–1950*. What was once central to the life of American city dwellers has hit a long decline. However, the life cycles of cities reveal that this process of growth, decline, and rebirth or revitalization happens in pockets and districts throughout the city. The older the city, the more times the process has taken place. Though downtowns are revitalizing in many cities, through decentralization, the downtown (or central business

district) will never be what it once was,¹ but it is still making a comeback in many cities across the continent.

One of the reasons downtowns are coming back is the growing appeal for Americans for a walkable urbanism. Christopher B. Leinberger (2005) in his article, “Turning Around Downtown: Twelve Steps to Revitalization,” writes, “The appeal of traditional downtowns—and the defining characteristic that sets those that are successful apart from their suburban competitors—is largely based on what can be summarized as walkable urbanism” (p. 1). Decades of sprawl, traffic congestion, bland suburbanization, and people feeling disconnected from the heart of the city has caused many to reconsider where they live and how they get around. Along with that, the cultural tide is shifting where more and more Americans are desirous of living an urban life. Leinberger (2005) goes on to write about why we walk and what compels more and more Americans to do so:

Since the rise of cities 8,000 years ago, humans have only wanted to walk about 1500 feet until they begin looking for an alternative means of transport: a horse, a trolley, a bicycle, or a car. This distance translates into about 160 acres—about the size of a super regional mall, including its parking lot. It is also about the size, plus or minus 25 percent, of Lower Manhattan, downtown Albuquerque, the Rittenhouse Square section of Philadelphia, the financial district of San Francisco, downtown Atlanta, and most other major downtowns in the country.

But the willingness to walk isn't just about the distance. Certainly no one is inspired to stroll from one end of a super regional mall parking lot to the other. People will walk 1500 feet or more only if they have an interesting and safe streetscape and people to watch along the way—a mix of sights and sounds that can make a

¹ The downtown, whether Manhattan, inside the Loop in Chicago, or Los Angeles, was once *the* business district. This is where one went for everything, whether shopping, the movies, to get a haircut, a wedding dress, and work. “From the late nineteenth century through the early twentieth century they [Americans] assumed that downtown was inevitable, that every American city, large and small, had to have a downtown. Although a few Americans had reservations, most also believed that downtown was desirable” (Fogelson, 2001, p. 5).

pedestrian forget that he is unintentionally getting enjoyable exercise. (pp. 1–2)

Portland's Old Town is reflective of the changes that Folgelson writes about in *Downtown*. Outside of New York's Soho, Portland boasts one of the largest concentrations² of cast-iron buildings in America ("Cast-Iron History and Portland's Old Town," n.d.). One summer, I worked part-time as a bicycling guide. My favorite tour to lead was the Historic Downtown Tour. Our shop was located in the heart of Old Town in one of the refurbished cast-iron buildings. The first part of the tour was through Old Town / China Town, where we wove through an amazing historic district that boasts a rich and colorful (and tragic) past. The architectural beauty of this historic district, full of exquisite cast-iron buildings, has many stories to tell—stories of hope and suffering for Chinese immigrants seeking a better life, stories of desperation for the women working in brothels, and stories of success by savvy entrepreneurs. The old cast-iron buildings have seen much.³

Cities always have been defined by their built environments because, well, that is simply what we see. Not only that, but a city's built environment influences the day-to-day lives of its citizens.⁴ If you lived in Dallas, Phoenix, or Los Angeles, there is no denying that these cities are heavily defined by an auto-centric nature. On the other hand, life is completely different for residents of Hong Kong amid the high concentration of skyscrapers. What is the difference between these cities? The overwhelming difference, which defines and distinguishes

² Located in the Old Town / Chinatown district.

³ This gritty neighborhood is in the midst of a transition to become Portland's entertainment district. For more about these kinds of districts in urban areas, check out Campo et al. (2008), "The entertainment zone: Unplanned nightlife and the revitalization of the American downtown."

⁴ Great examples of this are the various sociologists associated with the Chicago School in the early 20th century (Park, Wirth, Burgess, et al.) in contrast to the growing "rival" school, the LA School (Dear, et al). These two schools were significantly affected by the built environments of their respective cities, whether the industrial-era city of Chicago in the early 1900s or the polycentric and postmodern city of Los Angeles in the late 1900s.

them from one another, as well as determines how people live, is the cities' built environments. Sprawl versus density. Horizontal versus vertical.

When exploring the New Testament epistles, there are many ways to address various aspects of these ancient letters. Commentaries and Bible resources on the epistles are full of brilliant insights, whether plumbing the depths of the Greek language, plotting timelines of events, or correlating the journeys as found in Acts. However, there are a few things we should keep in mind when it comes to understanding and interpreting the epistles. "The NT letters are less literary, formal and artistic than many classical Greek treatises but still generally longer, more carefully structured, and more didactic than typical personal correspondence" (Klein et al., 1993, p. 352). More than simply random letters, there was a purposefulness behind their origins and circulations. "A careful analysis, however, reveals complexities in the epistles. Though the most deliberately and directly didactic of all the NT genres, epistles are also the most 'occasional.' In other words, the authors wrote the epistles for specific occasions to address individual audiences who were facing unique problems" (Klein et al., 1993, p. 352).

In this chapter, I will look beneath the storylines of the epistles to also consider the built environments of the cities referenced. William McAlpine (2011) states, "the church cannot thrive, let alone fulfill its mission in the twenty-first century without a comprehensive understanding of the praxis component inherent in the theology and hermeneutic of the built environment" (p. 11). The same applies to the 1st-century church. The built environment, including the urban infrastructure and transportation network, allowed for the rapid spread of the Gospel message and growth of the church. In this chapter, I will look at the built environment in some of the cities where early Christians lived. This also gives us insight into where and how churches gathered.

As Jeff Speck (2012) explains, "Cities were created to bring people together" (p. 105). In cities, churches are "assemblies" of Christians who gather together for worship, fellowship, and teaching. If Speck is accurate, then one of the reasons behind the formation and flourishing

of cities is that humanity is given the structure (built environment) or ability to come together and live in proximity to one another. In many cases, especially in pre-auto cities, this meant an inherent walkable urbanism. Should it then be any surprise that the ancient Greek word co-opted to describe God's new covenant people would be "assembly." We are identified by what we do—gather or assemble.

The walkable urbanism of the 1st century, along with the political climate, greatly influenced how the early church gathered. McAlpine (2011) offers insight into the early church in his book *Sacred Space for the Missional Church*: "This investigation is based on the premise that church buildings provide one of the most effective means of gaining insight into a church's belief system and mission" (p. 33). He argues that where churches gathered was reflective of their values and belief system as well as their posture toward mission. I agree and would like to add another layer to the conversation of where churches gathered. The gathering places of the early church also were reflective of the city's built environment. These two observations give us greater insight when we read the New Testament epistles. This also gives us insight into today's church in North America as well since the rise of the megachurch phenomenon is reflective of the city's built environment (sprawl) and transportation preference (automobiles) for worshippers at these churches. In both cases, the 1st century and now, the built environments of the cities determine much.

Everything has a context. Every epistle written has a context. This context includes where the writer penned the letter, the circumstances surrounding the impetus for the letter, and the geographic setting for the church or individual who received the letters. The last portion is what I am focusing on here. I want us to look at not only where churches gathered, but also in the built environments of these ancient cities.

The Built Environment of 1st-Century Cities

Donovan Rypkema (2003) in his article "The Importance of Downtown in the 21st Century" writes that "buildings can have

meanings. Important buildings are symbols” (p. 9). Buildings are not neutral bits of architectural design and construction practices; they actually communicate a value system and reveal a window into the soul of the culture. Urban form also reveals much about the transportation technologies at the time when the buildings were constructed. In contemporary America, we have struggled with the value of place and the meanings of buildings. Rypkema (2003) laments, “We have unvalued our built environment, and by doing so we have devalued our buildings” (p. 10). Buildings are communicating, whether today or the 1st century, but what are they communicating?

One of the favorite activities we do in training church planters and missionary teams is a photo observation exercise. We stumbled onto this activity during one of our training events, where one of the session speakers was not able to make it on time and we had an hour to fill. We told the participants to pair up and go into the neighborhood to take pictures of a building that stands out to them. When the participants returned, we collected their photos and projected them on the screen. We then had each group share why they had taken the picture it did, what stood out, and what value system the building was communicating. It was a rich experience, as we learned much about the neighborhood simply by what we observed. Lots of questions erupted. Why was the cornerstone of that church written in German? Why does that house have an 8-foot bamboo wall around it so no one can see in the yard? Why are there bars on many of the windows of the homes and apartments? What started off as pure accidental experiment turned into one the best parts of the training.

Buildings communicate much. They were designed by architects and constructed by builders—all people. People are products of and contributors to culture, which means that when we consider a city’s built environment, we are seeing a cultural value system. Recently, I was with a group that was viewing before and after photos of various downtown revitalization projects in Chicago. In one case, an exquisitely ornate building complex was razed and replaced with a modern brutalist office tower. In Portland, the historic Portland Hotel, a Queen Anne Châteauesque building, opened in 1890 only to be demolished in

1951 to make room for a parking garage. In each of these cases, what happened? What changed? The values of culture as well as transportation technologies changed. Historic buildings were deemed disposable in order to meet the growing need for more parking and office space downtown. This also marked a further embrace of Fordist principles and value systems.

The built environments of cities in the 1st century, where the early church was rooted, were a stark contrast to the urban fabric of North American cities today. Many of the cities built during the height of the Greek-influenced Near East world had a certain look and feel to them.

In ancient Greece, monumental public buildings—theaters, stadia, gymnasia, and temples—were erected to enrich the beauty of the city. Consistent with the Greek emphasis on collective civic endeavor, private houses were small and unpretentious. The Greek devoted their energy to public institutions such as the *agora* (literally, “the place where people get together”), which dominated the city center. (Phillips, 2009, p. 117)

The famous (or infamous) grid pattern had been introduced by Hippodamus, influenced cities in Asia, and took root in the United States as early as 1641 in New Haven, Connecticut (Phillips, 2009, p. 117). Cities under Roman rule built off this and adapted accordingly. Rome’s conquest shaped and reshaped urban history and set forth a new trajectory.

Augustus’ triumph at Actium in 31 B.C. over the armies of the last Ptolemaic monarch, Cleopatra VII, and her ally Mark Antony marked the close of the Hellenistic era. The Romans already had subdued virtually all the Greek city-states, the larger part of the old Seleucid Empire, and much else beyond. For the next four centuries, the history of urbanism in the West would be written largely by the Romans and those who submitted to their will. (Kotkin, 2006, p. 31)

Roman cities made a break from Greek cities. Central to this was the pomp and superfluousness of the emperors who sought to make their marks not only on history but their cities.

Classical Rome was constructed using a different model, one that developed from an imperial code that stressed grandeur, domination, and (eventually) excess. The construction of urban space in Rome was based not on the political equality of its citizens but on the military power of the state and, later, the ambitions of the emperors. Functional space within the Roman forum was embedded in a larger, meaningful space governed by political and cultural symbols. (Gottdiener & Hutchinson, 2010, p. 32)

This was the built environment of the cities in which the church was birthed. Gottdiener and Hutchinson (2010) bring to light the typical dwelling place of Roman residents: “The majority of the population lived in the 46,000 *insulae* (apartment buildings) within the city; these buildings were typically three stories tall and contained five apartments, housing five to six people each. There were only 4,000 private homes within the city” (p. 32). The street pattern was certainly more focused on walkability since that is how people got around, which impacted the design of the streetscape. “The streets were narrow, twisting, and dark, averaging 6 to 15 feet wide; the largest street was just 20 feet wide. The city fire department consisted of some 7,000 men. The *circus maximus*, where chariot races took place, seated more than 100,000 people and was surrounded by taverns, shops, and eating places” (Gottdiener & Hutchinson, 2010, p. 32). This description reveals a lively and dynamic urban area, not unlike certain entertainment districts in North American cities today—sporting venues surrounded by pubs, shopping for the middle-class, and plenty of restaurants. Rome had a 2,000-year head start.

Louis Wirth (2012), in his 1938 groundbreaking essay “Urbanism as a Way of Life” notes, “The city consequently tends to resemble a mosaic of social worlds in which the transition from one to the other is abrupt” (p. 36). While this was true of the Chicago that Wirth and others in the Chicago School knew, this is also reflective of urban life, especially as we explore cities in the 1st century AD. Urban life was a cacophony of cultures, ethnicities, and languages, all collected in various cities. This was the fabric of life in which the church was birthed and that influenced where and how churches gathered. The city influenced

the individual lives of its inhabitants, and yet at the same time, the individuals collectively made up a city's persona. As Kevin Lynch (2011) observes about cities, "There seems to be a public image of any given city which is the overlap of many individual images. Or perhaps there is a series of public images, each held by some significant number of citizens. Such group images are necessary if an individual is to operate successfully within his environment and to cooperate with his fellows" (p. 501).

With these ancient cities developing the way they did over time, they had been impacted and influenced by numerous empires and civilizations. As a result, there was a chaotic mixture of buildings, streets, public places and spaces, businesses, and cultural emblems as the city invented and reinvented itself continuously. Matt Hern (2010), an East Vancouver, British Columbia, resident, reminisces about this quasi-similar dynamic in modern-day Montréal:

In so much of Montréal, and not just the little Plateau/Mile End area where I tend to stay, dense, anomalous activity seems to thrive. There are unexpected cafés and bars, buildings that have clearly been transformed from one use to another over the years, businesses that seem beautifully out of place. There's also a flexibility and so much mixed-use everywhere: small manufacturing, residential, commercial, parks all in close proximity, etc. It looks and feels like the city has been layered and rebuilt on top of itself over and over again. (p. 73)

This concept of mixed usage is what gives cities such a robust and energizing street and sidewalk life. This gives rise to the opportunity for movements to spread much more rapidly due to proximity and repeated contact. "In the Piazza Navona of Rome, streets and squares are carved out of the building mass, giving direction and continuity to urban life and creating physical connections, meaningful places. In Houston, Texas, on the other hand, the urban form consists of separate buildings floating among parking lots and roadways" (Trancik, 2007, p. 65). Since these were the dynamics in which the church came into existence, is it any surprise that one of the reasons the Gospel spread so rapidly was

that the built environment of the cities, along with the transportation infrastructure connecting cities with one another, allowed for the message to spread organically?

Urban Form and How Churches Gathered

When we read through Acts and the various epistles, what becomes clear to the reader is that most often churches met in the homes of various Christians. There are numerous reasons why the home was utilized as the primary venue for early church gatherings:

- Poverty rendered the construction of buildings difficult.
- The church was birthed in a hostile, pluralistic society so building and owning their own buildings for sacred purposes were not feasible.
- The private dwelling was more reflective of the teaching of Jesus and the early understanding of the church as the new temple of God. (McAlpine, 2011, pp. 35–36)

For churches to meet in homes was also not an abnormality of culture. “Fellowship around a meal that was accompanied by teaching and/or discussion was common in the early church as well as in the broader culture of the day” (McAlpine, 2011, p. 35). Some today attempt to make over-generalizations stating that since the church in the 1st century met in homes that we should do so today, regardless of culture or context. The difficulty with that framework is that some cultures are more conducive toward this with regard to their society’s social norms while other cultures may be more hesitant or apprehensive toward larger gatherings in one’s home. Also, the built environment varies from nation to the nation and from city to city.

Bishwapriya Sanyal and Vinit Mukhija (2001) note in their article “Institutional Pluralism and Housing Delivery: A Case of Unforeseen Conflicts in Mumbai, India,” that in a new housing project that was part of a larger slum redevelopment plan in modern-day Mumbai, plans called for poor families to receive an apartment that was roughly 26 square meters (p. 2046). That stands in stark contrast with many

American homes where the national average is roughly 2,400 square feet (“Median and Average Square Feet of Floor Area in New Single-Family Houses Completed by Location,” n.d.). Suggesting that *all* churches everywhere and in *all* times ought to meet in homes quickly becomes problematic.

The details of early church gatherings are not clearly spelled out in Scripture. McAlpine (2011) points out, “Scripture provides minimal informative detail regarding the design specifics of spaces used in early Christian worship. Apart from the description in Acts 20 of the room in which Paul engaged in a lengthy preaching/teaching session, the available information is focused more on a description of the activities that occurred and explanations of their relevance rather than on a description of the built environment itself” (p. 37). From archaeological evidence we know that some of the house churches, probably those of affluent patrons, could be large—as in Corinth (McAlpine, 2011, p. 39).

The space and layout all had an impact on the day-to-day lives of Christians in the early church. Urban form and transportation dictated how they lived and gathered, as it still does for us today. The epistles were written to Christians meeting in homes in various urban centers dotted throughout the Empire. The issues they struggled with were urban issues. Paul and the other epistle writers sought to apply biblical truth to issues that plagued the early church—things such as idol worship, sleeping with temple prostitutes, and eating meat sacrificed to idols. Some of the cultural and moral ailments plagued all urban dwellers, whether Christian or not. Some of the challenges were specific to new Christians understanding the implications of the Gospel and the impact on urban life. They were called to a lifestyle that was radically different from the majority of people in their cities. The presence of the epistles reveals the tension of living in the city and living a life marked by the Gospel.

Chapter 13

The Mission of the Urban Church

When I teach a seminary class on urban church planting, I often invite guest speakers from various theological and methodological viewpoints to share their perspectives. These visits often led to lively conversations. For while there are many commonalities, there also are distinct—though complimentary—differences between a Neo-Reformed posture toward the city and that of a Neo-Anabaptists. At times, I could tell the students were squirming as they wrestled with ideas and concepts different from their own.

One evening, I invited a local church planter to share, and right out of the chute he dropped a theological bomb. He stood before the class and said, “You know, this whole social justice stuff is unnecessary, overrated. All we need to do is simply give people Jesus and that’s it. I was having my quiet times recently, and one of the things I learned is that I don’t need to be people’s friend; I just need to tell them about Jesus.” My jaw hit the floor. We had spent the bulk of the semester talking about many of the concepts in this book, including the urban trajectory of the *missio Dei* and how God desires to redeem urban people and urban places, that the Gospel is about cosmic and holistic redemption—more than simply populating heaven. I watched as many of my students squirmed as well. Dissonance can be a good teacher.

I was reminded of this episode recently while listening to one of Timothy Keller’s sermons. I forget the title of his sermon, but I vividly

remember him making the comment: “One of the marks of our salvation is a concern for the poor.” That assertion stands in stark contrast to that of my classroom guest speaker. These contrasting beliefs lead us to ask: What is the mission of the church? We have been looking at the urban trajectory of the Bible and how the early church was intrinsically woven into the fabric of urban life in the first century. Fast-forward 21 centuries, and the church finds herself still in an urban world, yet significantly more urbanized and larger than the early Christians could have imagined. Earl Lavender (2012) bridges this gap when he writes, “If Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is contextualizing the message of the good news of the kingdom of God for the cities of his day, it would be helpful for us to understand the similar dynamics of life in our cities” (Loc. 987). In light of this, it is my goal now to flesh out some of the parameters of urban mission today.

In chapter 2 of *View From the Urban Loft*, “Parameters of City-Reaching,” I attempted to define a broad framework for what it means to be engaged in urban ministry. “City-reaching then is defined as *extending both saving and common grace to the city*” (Benesh, 2011, p. 23). In many ways, this lines up with the topic of spelling out the mission of the urban church. What is the mission of the urban church? First, the term “urban” needs to continuously be revamped and revisited in light of global changes that are not only impacting cities in North America but in every other urbanizing country.

In *Why Cities Matter*, Um and Buzzard (2013) in their introduction write, “It is our opinion that books about the city have often misunderstood and misrepresented the city. Much Christian literature about the city has focused merely on inner-city problems (crime, the homeless, etc.) and how an urban ministry might fix these problems, rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of the city. Intentionally or unintentionally, cities have been portrayed as places of problem, rather than places of opportunity and blessedness” (Loc. 190). This reveals the challenge and need to continue to wordsmith “urban,” because based on the context, it can mean different things.

Cities and neighborhoods are birthed, grow, mature, decline, and are reborn over and over. Is it any wonder that a city defines the term *urban* based upon its (or a neighborhood's) life stage? In context, *urban* Detroit conjures up images of degraded inner-city neighborhoods and hollowed-out buildings with an abundance of poverty and unemployment. On the other hand, *urban* Vancouver can mean, more or less, life associated with living downtown and the ensuing characteristics of hip, trendy, modern, and sophisticated. (Benesh, 2011, p. 29)

Alan Ehrenhalt (2013) in his book *The Great Inversion and the Future of the American City* addresses these changes of what we mean by "urban." "For much of the past decade, the national media paid relatively little attention to it. While they were focused on Baghdad and Kabul, our own cities changed right in front of us, changed from year to year, faster than even the most attentive students of urban life could easily keep up with" (Loc. 53). Whereas American cities used to see immigrants and the poor living in the heart of the city close to manufacturing jobs, over the past few decades we are seeing a reversal of this trend. Immigrants and the poor are collecting in the suburbs at a growing rate. Ehrenhalt contends that American cities are more and more resembling European cities. "Chicago is gradually coming to resemble a traditional European city—Vienna or Paris in the nineteenth century, or for that matter, Paris today. The poor and the newcomers are living in the outskirts. The people who live near the center, some of them black or Hispanic but most of them white, who can afford to do so" (Ehrenhalt, 2013, Loc. 49).

"Urban" needs to continuously be redefined. As Um and Buzzard (2013) indicated, much of the literature revolving around the "urban church" or "urban ministry" is still stuck in a mid-20th-century framework. However, this is not 1974—even if there are some places that fit the old structure. "Atlanta for example, has long been overwhelmingly black, but between 2000 and 2010, according to census figures, the percentages of African Americans within the city fell from 61 percent to 54 percent; in 2009, the city came within a few hundred votes of electing a white Republican mayor" (Ehrenhalt, 2013, Loc. 56).

So what is the mission of the urban church? If “urban” is a moving target, then what role does the church play in cities? As we have seen, labels can be helpful and informative but also limiting and passé. The one thing constant about cities is that they are always changing. We have seen how cities developed from Old Testament to New Testament times, and since then, they have grown exponentially. “Urban” is a moving target. It includes the wealthy, elite, middle class, poor, and different ethnicities, as well as the inner city, mature suburbs, and brand-new exurbs. There are places like Port Moody, British Columbia, that sits 15 miles outside of downtown Vancouver, but their city center is filled with high-rise (20+ stories) residential towers that offer an “urban” lifestyle of high-density living, walkability, and easy access to mass transit. One website details these changes: “More recently, development jumped to the west side of Ioco Road, where a kind of mini-Yaletown¹ has sprouted up” (“Tri-Cities towers,” n.d.).

I would like to propose that the mission of the urban church, like my definition about city-reaching, is about extending and embodying both *saving grace* and *common grace*.² The mission of the urban church, as God’s covenant community, is to be ambassadors or representatives to the world, seeking the welfare / peace / prosperity of the city for the poor and elite and everyone in between, by extending both arms of grace to the city, common grace and saving grace, knowing God desires to redeem both urban people and urban places. I will now attempt to define and unpack my terms.

Conn and Ortiz (2001), in explaining “urban mission’s action agenda,” write, “For Paul the taproot of that mission was the glory of God and its display and acknowledgement in global worship. Mission was not the ultimate goal of the churches Paul planted. Nor was it the goal of church growth. . . . God’s glory fuels our mission and draws our worship” (p. 141). From this framework, the church, both collectively

¹ Yaletown is a former warehouse district in downtown Vancouver that has been revitalized with the construction of many high-rise residential towers and is a densely populated neighborhood on the downtown peninsula.

² I again give credit to Ray Bakke for that statement.

and individually, are ambassadors or representatives to our cities. We represent Christ to the city in the same way foreign diplomats do in their host countries through their embassies.³ A diplomat is simply “an official representing a country abroad.” The purposes of these diplomats or ambassadors are to represent what a culture and people are like. This is the truest sense of what the word missionary means. We are ambassadors or even “diplomats” to our cities as we represent to a watching world what it means and looks like to live as God’s covenant community. We do this by offering both arms of grace: common and saving.

Since I already have addressed common and saving grace, I will simply say that as ambassadors of God we should be about seeking the welfare, peace, and prosperity of the cities in which we live. We represent the King and what life is like in our “home country” (i.e. the Kingdom of God). We do this by being conduits of God’s common grace where we are passionate about making our cities better. This could play out in so many areas—education, social services, architecture, arts, foster care, urban and transportation planning, job creation in underserved areas, and business development that keeps capital in the city.

We know from Scripture that the early church sought to live as ambassadors. “Through its lifestyle the church was to oppose the evils that God hates—harsh treatment of wives and children (Col 3:19, 21), unjust oppression of slaves (Col 4:1), the discord that, in society then, promoted litigation (1 Cor 6:1–11). The church’s good works were to be neighbor-loving demonstrations of God’s love for the troubled and poor (Acts 9:36; 2 Cor 9:8–9; 1 Tim 5:10; 6:18)” (Conn & Ortiz, 2001, p. 148).

We, too, should be conduits of God’s saving grace as his ambassadors (missionaries) in our cities. Not only are we modeling what the Gospel of the Kingdom is about, but we are also sharing this good news with others. Our lifestyle and posture in the city shows to urban dwellers that the outflow of our faith in God through Christ

³ This concept was spelled out in Timothy Keller’s podcast sermon entitled “Mission.”

compels us to love the city, serve the city, and sacrifice on behalf of the city. Lavender urges his readers to see the interplay between our lifestyle and proclamation, “It is a plea to recognize that proclamation in the absence of visible life transformation, leading all believers to lives of love and concern for others, lacks purpose and power” (Lavender, 2012, Loc. 1034). This ideology stands in stark contrast with the story of my guest speaker at the beginning of this chapter. Our faith in Christ is manifest in our approach and posture in the city.

Think back to the example of foreign diplomats. If the Swiss ambassador to the U.S. and his entourage at the embassy in New York City (I will pick on the Swiss since everyone loves them, which makes this illustration outlandish) were a bunch of drunken revelers out every night partying, trashing bars, fleeing the local police in high-speed chases, and selling pirated movies, then it could prove to be a bad example for Switzerland. Locals in proximity to the embassy who may have never been to Switzerland would base their ideas of what Swiss people and Swiss culture are like on their knowledge of this local group.

The same goes with the urban church—or the church anywhere for that matter. If all that the inhabitants of the city know about the church is its evangelistic zeal and not a concern for the city, then we simply become white noise and fail as true ambassadors (missionaries) to our cities. James writes, “Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith” (James 2:18). Keller (2012) echoes this when he writes, “It is not enough for Christians to form a culture [church] that merely ‘counters’ the values of the city. We must also commit, with all the resources of our faith and life, to serve sacrificially the good of the whole city, and especially the poor” (p. 171). He goes on to say:

Christians must work for the peace, security, justice, and prosperity of their neighbors, loving them in word and deed, whether they believe the same things we believe. In Jeremiah 29:7, God calls the Jews not just to live in the city but to love it and work for its shalom—its economic, social, and spiritual flourishing. Christians are, indeed citizens of God’s heavenly city, but *these citizens are always the best possible citizens of their earthly city*. They walk in the

steps of the One who laid down his life for his opponents. (Keller, 2012, pp. 171–172)

It is too easy to bifurcate the Gospel; to say it is either about redeeming urban people (evangelism) or redeeming urban places (social justice). A quick survey of denominations reveals that usually one by one they tend to lean to one side or the other. The challenge is to hold both aspects of the Gospel in tension, knowing that redemption or salvation is much larger than populating heaven with souls. The tension revolves around what the mission of the urban church is. How much is it about “gospel proclamation” and how much is it about “gospel demonstration?” In my own journey, I can readily see when I leaned too far in one direction while not equally upholding the other. Jon Dennis (2013) in *Christ + City* writes, “The greatest need of our day is for the gospel to enliven first our hearts, and then, our cities. Which is to say that our most urgent calling is a gospel calling. It is urban—but it’s not a call for new roads, better housing for the poor, bigger church buildings, or politicians with more integrity. It isn’t a call for wiser city planning or even racial reconciliation. Our most urgent need today is for the gospel to awaken the urban generation” (Loc. 103). Initially, I would push back on this assertion, in light of this chapter and the trajectory of this whole book, but Dennis (2013) goes on to write in the following paragraph, “If the gospel penetrates our cities as never before, I believe we are bound to see racial reconciliation, greater compassion for the poor, and expanding church facilities (including house churches)—and, yes, even politicians with more integrity” (Loc. 113). The idea is that the Gospel ought to change everything—urban people and urban places. But is this the mission of the urban church?

What is the Mission of the Church? by DeYoung and Gilbert (2011) addresses this and the mission of the church in general. In some ways, I find their summary and conclusions limiting,⁴ especially in light of

⁴ I am always sensitive when I push back on some of the thoughts and writings from other authors because there is simply too much backbiting and negativity. I enjoyed this book tremendously, and it challenged some of my assumptions. I appreciate their love for the church and passion to keep the church on mission. My main area of disagreement is in regards to the nature of what it means to be a disciple.

cosmic redemption that the Gospel proclaims, but I also appreciate their contributions. They write, “*The mission of the church is to go into the world and make disciples by declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit and gathering these disciples into churches, that they might worship the Lord and obey his commands now and in eternity to the glory of God the Father*” (p. 62). Shortly after that, they repeat, “So here it is again: the mission of the church—as seen in the Great Commission, the early church in Acts, and the life of the apostle Paul—is to win people to Christ and build them up in Christ. Making disciples—that is our task” (p. 63). I find their definition narrow but am grateful for their work to continue to help us hammer out our theology and wordsmith concerning mission.

The point they make is that while this is the mission of the church, when it comes to *individual Christians*, certainly they are to be about such things as gospel demonstration (social justice). In other words, the church as an institution is to be about evangelism and making disciples, but not social justice per se, which is the responsibility of individuals who make up the church. This seems not only a bit narrow, but technical and limited. Later in the book, they write, “But if you understand (as we’ve argued) that the church’s mission is actually the proclamation of the gospel and making disciples, then bettering the city’s and the world’s social condition becomes, at best, a less direct way of furthering that mission, and therefore it falls somewhat short of being a universal *obligation* for the local church” (DeYoung and Gilbert, 2011, p. 234).

This stands in contrast to what I said earlier in the book about key pieces of the Great Commission. I said that Jesus’s mandate for us to go and *make disciples*—who are to obey all that Jesus taught and commanded—necessitates redefining the term *disciple*. For most in the West, disciple is synonymous with acquiring biblical knowledge and a pious spirituality. In other words, we readily label people disciples if they are prayerful, read their Bibles, and are involved in their local churches. Yet, if one were to seek to do all that Jesus taught and commanded, then they surely would be thrust into a life of caring for the marginalized; shying away from power, prestige, and accolades; and

tangibly loving the widow, orphan, leper, blind, and foreigner. That does not diminish the importance of prayer, Bible study, and activism in the local church. However, it is only when coupled with this “other half” of what it means to be a disciple that we get a closer picture of what a Great Commission disciple looks like. It is at this juncture that I would respectfully deviate from DeYoung and Gilbert.

The mission of the urban church—or suburban or rural for that matter—entails extending both common and saving grace to our cities. In other words, we proclaim salvation, and we demonstrate salvation. What is needed is a theology of the city that guides our posture and approach in cities. If we are to live out the mission of the church in the city, then it would be helpful to construct a theology of the city. I define it as:

A theology of the city is applying a biblical framework or perspective in which to view the city in all its complexities—from the human condition, urban form, economics, politics, etc—and drawing insights from theological reflection rooted in Scripture and applied to the cities. It is learning to see the city as God sees the city, with its possibilities for human flourishing, role as apex of human creativity, and inherent common grace, and at the same time addressing its systemic brokenness brought on by original sin.⁵

The church in the city can be guided by a theology that affirms God’s hand in the formation of cities and inherent common grace but at the same time recognizes that at times, much of what is broken is the result of individual and systemic sin.

Calling

Related to the topic of urban mission is the subject of calling. In some ways, this is what DeYoung and Gilbert (2011) were alluding to. If social justice or gospel demonstration issues are to be initiated and

⁵ I first shared this on March 22, 2013, during a talk called “Exegeting the 21st Century City.” This is my working definition.

personified by individual Christians, then the conversation quickly turns to *calling*. How do our sense of individual callings, what it means to be a disciple, the mission of the urban church, and the needs of the world intersect and overlap?

John Friedmann (2011), in the introduction to his book *Insurgencies: Essays in Planning Theory*, lets the reader into his inner life. Friedmann's scholarly works and insights into planning are legendary, as he has influenced generations of urban planners. In *Insurgencies*, he uses the words "vocation" and "calling" in the same sense that pastors and missionaries do. He writes to young aspiring planners:

In closing, then, allow me to tell you, the reader, why the idea of planning as a *vocation* [italics mine] still appeals to me, and why despite many setbacks, errors, and disenchantments, I nevertheless believe that planning as a field of professional study and practice is as valid a vocation as any other on the horizon. For some young people this claim may be sufficient reason to stumble into our field with an ardent desire to "do good competently" or to "change the world." (Friedman, 2011, p. 11)

Most often, and this is a tension I have lived with since becoming a Christian in college, there is a belief that *calling* or *vocation* (in the sense of divine origins) has been reserved for professional clergy, whether pastors, missionaries, or other Christian workers. It is as if those who are paid to do ministry are the only ones called, and everyone else is left to figure out careers on their own, without divine intervention. What Friedmann asserts, as an example, whether he has in mind the sense of vocation as originating in God or not, is that we are called to *be* something or to *do* something. Not only that, but he boldly writes of his career as an urban planner, whether in Chile or China or teaching at UCLA, as a *calling*. I believe that he is onto something. I would even contend that this notion of calling is not reserved for only those who identify with and follow Christ. God, in his care for creation (which

includes cities) has called out many to help steward, care, lead, and influence culture as part of common grace.⁶

Michael Novak (1996), in his book *Business as a Calling*, writes, “We didn’t give ourselves the personalities, talents, or longings we were born with. When we fulfill these—these gifts from beyond ourselves—it is like fulfilling something *we were meant to do* [italics mine]” (p. 18). What he wrote is pause-worthy. For many to read those words and allow them to sink in is a great comfort. We did not chose our personalities nor our talents nor our longings. This is something I have personally wrestled with over the years. Often we play the comparison game, especially when we seen great attributes in others that we desire. For most of us, we need to simply learn to become more comfortable in our skin, knowing that God has hardwired us this way. . . *for a purpose*.

Those around me know I have a deep-seated passion, love, interest, fascination, and heart for cities. Having grown up in small-town Iowa, I did not come by this naturally nor early on, but somewhere along the way God supernaturally infused this love and passion within me. I did not seek this, as I used to despise cities and was terrified of them, but over time it became like a homing beacon that mysteriously altered my gravitational pull to cities. I have concluded that involvement in cities is part of my calling. R. C. Sproul (2009) writes, “The question we as Christians wrestle with is, ‘Am I in the center of God’s will with respect to my vocation?’ In other words, ‘Am I doing with my life what God wants me to do?’” (Loc. 453).

Sproul (2009) and Novak (1996) both offer thoughts on calling that are helpful as we consider what we are called to as disciples in cities. Again, do not narrowly define this conversation only to those who are in paid professional ministry. Sproul (2009) sets out four questions to think through: “The problem with discerning one’s calling focuses heavily on four important questions:

- What *can* I do?
- What do I *like* to do?

⁶ Read the section entitled “Can a Calling Be Entirely Secular” in chapter 1 in Novak, 1996, pp. 37–39.

- What would I like to be *able* to do?
- What *should* I do?

The last question can plague the sensitive conscience” (loc. 474). As we look at the work before us as diplomats, ambassadors, and missionaries to our cities, these questions help form the shape of our calling. Pastors are not the only ones needing to answer these questions, and as Friedmann (2011) articulated, people in non-clergy occupations can have an equal sense of *calling* and *vocation*.⁷

Novak (1996) says, “To identify them [calling], two things are normally required: the God-given ability to do the job and the (equally God-given) enjoyment in doing it because of your desire to do it” (p. 19). In *Business as a Calling*, Novak spells out four characteristics of calling:

- First, each calling is unique to each individual. Each of us is as unique in our calling as we are in being made in the image of God.
- Second, a calling requires certain preconditions. It requires more than desires; it requires talent. For a calling to be right, it must fit our abilities.
- Third, a true calling reveals its presence by the enjoyment and sense of renewed energies its practice yields us. Enjoying what we do is not always a feeling of enjoyment; it is sometimes the gritty resolution a man or woman shows in doing what must be done—perhaps with inner dread and yet without whimpering self-pity.
- A fourth truth about callings is also apparent; they are not usually easy to discover. Frequently many false paths are taken before the satisfying path is last uncovered. Experiments, painful setbacks, false hopes, discernment, prayer, and much patience are often required before the light goes on. (pp. 34–35)

⁷ I am reminded of a recent conversation with a friend who is a transportation planner working for the city. Having grown up as a pastor’s kid, he knows what ministry as a career and calling is all about. For awhile, he wrestled through whether God was calling him in this direction. Instead, he sensed God was leading him down the path that he is on now as a planner. He would describe his job in terms of *calling* and *vocation*.

These characteristics, combined with what Sproul and Friedmann write about, begin to convey this notion of calling for people living in the city.⁸ At times, this calling may propel us in the direction of seeking common grace in the city, and at other times, we are called to focus more on the saving grace aspects. These are not mutually exclusive because an urban planner, while seeking the peace and welfare of the city through equitable planning also lives as a missionary, diplomat, and ambassador of the King. Conversely, those more focused on saving grace in terms of their calling can also lean into gospel demonstration as well. In other words, regardless of where and how we lean in light of our callings, vocations, and occupations, it does not mean we should neglect common or saving grace.

Os Guinness (2003) in *The Call* writes, “God normally calls us along the lines of our giftedness, but the purposes of giftedness is stewardship and service, not selfishness. Giftedness does not stand alone in helping us discern our callings. It lines up in response to God’s call alongside other factors, such as family heritage, our own life opportunities, God’s guidance, and our unquestioning readiness to do what he shows” (p. 45). Guinness builds on this and contends that calling should precede what jobs we take, which then helps guides us in our decision-making process. “A sense of calling should precede a choice of job and career, and the main way to discover calling is along the line of what we are each created and gifted to be. Instead of ‘You are what you do,’ calling says: ‘Do what you are’” (p. 45).

What does this have to do with the mission of the urban church? This can be answered in numerous ways from the corporate, institutional, or organizational church to individual Christians. This conversation of calling also affects the spread of new churches in our cities and where and why new churches are being planted where they are. In *Metrospiritual* I ask:

⁸ In *Metrospiritual*, pp. 81–104, I dedicate a whole chapter on calling in relation to site selection for church planters. At the beginning of the chapter, I share several personal examples of calling in my life and the times where I responded as well as when I turned a deaf ear. The chapter analyzes the motives for site selection among church planters, where and how they decided to plant churches where they did. What is needed is a deeper exploration of calling and how that shapes the church planting process.

The first question to ask is: Is God calling me to this part of the city? Is the decision based on preference or fear? Is cultural compatibility and geographic familiarity the most important factor that weighs the heaviest? My fear is that if we church planters only stick to the parts of the city that we like, love, and are full of people just like us then there will be many parts of the city that will continue to be untouched. Is God truly calling most to only plant in suburban settings or chic urban districts? (Benesh, 2011, p. 104)

But more than that, this conversation on calling opens up the topic of how churches are to approach their cities. What should their responses be? How should the church engage, both individually as Christians and corporately as a body, in the city? How does a sense of calling shape the mission of the urban church? Should the church, like DeYoung and Gilbert explain, simply be about evangelism and discipling?

These questions radiate from our notions of calling, the mission of the urban church, and common and saving grace. The church, since its inception in the 1st century, has always been about extending both arms of grace to the watching world. At times, we have done remarkably well and at other times we have failed miserably, but I believe the impetus comes from this sense of mission and calling to be salt and light to the world. As a result, we are compelled to do something about human suffering, we respond in the face of global and local calamities, and have a history of setting up schools (from elementary schools to universities), orphanages, and hospitals. If our primary mission were to simply be about evangelism and discipleship, then many of these society-shaping institutions would never have been birthed.

Recently I came across an out-of-print book entitled *The Role of the Church in New France* by Cornelius Jaenan (1985). The book analyzes the role of the Roman Catholic Church in New France⁹ and how it shaped much of life in what is today Québec. Jaenan starts off by noting:

⁹ “New France was the area colonized by France in North America during a period beginning with the exploration of the Saint Lawrence River by Jacques Cartier in 1534 and ending with the cession of New France to Spain and Great Britain in 1763” (“New France,” n.d.).

Nowadays, a church is seen as a voluntary association of people for the worship of God and the pursuit of religious activities. In New France, particularly in its Acadian, Canadian, and upper country sectors, the Roman Catholic Church was the exclusive institutional expression after 1627 of the religious and spiritual life of the colonial population. Its activities touched *all aspects* [italics mine] of life—social, economic, political, demographic, as well as religious. The role of the church was so comprehensive and pervading to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that some historians have concluded that it was *the* [italics mine] dominant force in the French colony. (p. 3)

I will use the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church in New France to illustrate the tensions of the mission of the urban church. In many ways, there were notable (and even noble) changes that took place when the Roman Catholic Church forged a civil society¹⁰ out of raw wilderness in what is now Québec. However, there were also many abuses of power that ran concurrently with the expansion of the church. To address that, I will compare and contrast with other writers who address the role of the urban church. My only guarantee in this process of sorting through the storyline of the Roman Catholic Church expansion in New France is that it will be messy in terms of weighing, dissecting, and evaluating. I hope this will be a helpful illustration, despite the tensions that surface.

There is much dissonance in regards to how to view the role of the church during this time. Some contend it was the “Golden Age in Canada’s history,” while others “saw it as an oppressive theocracy with clerical intervention present in all aspects of public and private

¹⁰ I have briefly touched on this notion of a civil society elsewhere in this book. This is a highly polemical conversation because how does one define what a civil society truly is? Also, who gets to define it and are there even universal markers that identify the attributes of a civil society? In the conversation of foreign aid, as an example, much of the defining of a civil society has emanated from Northern [hemisphere] middle-class whites who are attempted to discern how and where and why when it comes to dispersing aid in Southern (Global South) developing countries. This has even trickled into the church as Soong-Chan Rah (2012) notes, “Pastors and churches that measure up to the American definitions of success become the examples and models for the Evangelical community. Success in an upper-middle-class, white, suburban community in the United States usually entitles American pastors to apply their systems, ideas, and values to a poor, starving, war-torn nation with the same expectation of material success” (Loc. 1745).

life” (Jaenen, 1985, p. 3). From the beginning, the church in New France was a missionary church, with clergy accompanying various exploration and trading expeditions and offering religious services (Jaenen, 1985, p. 9). Particularly, the Jesuits were passionate evangelists who saw large numbers of *Amerindians*¹¹ converted. However, recent scholarship dampens these numbers by indicating that many of these Amerindians remained attached to their traditional beliefs and simply “added” Catholicism (Jaenen, 1985, p. 10). What is evident, though, is that the church grew rapidly and along the way began the establishment of services, institutions, and cultural norms that would carve out a new civil society across a large swath of North America.

For the sake of brevity, I am skipping large time periods and events during this expansion. Over time, missions were established until they had a large enough population base to become formal parishes. “Strictly speaking, all the chapels and churches of New France were missions until canonically erected into parishes” (Jaenen, 1985, p. 16). Despite a checkered history, what we do know is that through their efforts, the colonial clergy established many cornerstone institutions and services that are still serving and benefiting society today. This took the form of educational institutions, hospitals, orphanages, and other services to care for the least and the last. I will point out a few examples from the book.

Educational Institutions. “Schooling was the preserve of the church in the colony; it was one of the domains in which it had to establish its ‘usefulness to his Majesty’s service.’ Not surprisingly, in a remote and undeveloped outpost, all the religious communities, even those devoted mainly to hospital work or chaplaincy service, assumed some responsibility for the education of the church of the colonists and of the few Amerindians who remained long enough in their hands to receive some instruction” (Jaenen, 1985, p. 17). The Jesuits founded a college at Québec in 1635, and the Récollets¹² had schools in Montreal, Trois

¹¹ This was the terms used in this book, which I will continue to use so I will not have to differentiate between Native American for the U.S. and First Nations for Canada.

¹² For more information about the Récollets, read Thériault, “Récollets” (n.d).

Rivières, and Louisbourg. From colleges that offered programs in hydrology to seminaries for the training of priests to schools for children, education was key in New France, and the church was behind its formation.

Charitable Work. “Along with education, the church was expected to provide various welfare services and maintain charitable institutions” (Jaenen, 1985, p. 20). The clergy were the ones establishing these hospitals for the care and benefit of the people. “The Quebec community hived off to form a new community and General Hospital for the care of the aged, infirm, and insane outside the walls of the city” (Jaenen, 1985, p. 20). In many other places, the sick were visited and cared for by such groups as the Grey Nuns. They also cared for “elderly people, orphans, foundlings, and ‘fallen women’” (Jaenen, 1985, p. 21). It was said of the Brothers of Charity that they had so given themselves sacrificially that they were in constant danger of infection and disease as they cared for the sick.

While I skipped over much and attempted to briefly summarize a few notable points, this little journey through the history of New France and the expansion of the Roman Catholic Church in modern-day Québec provides an interesting example—and in some ways a case study—for the mission of the urban church. As I mentioned previously, as the body of Christ it is my contention that we are to be about extending both common grace and saving grace to our cities. We are to be as passionate about evangelism as we are in caring for the poor and involvement for the betterment of our cities. They are not and cannot be separated. What we often find in churches today is a preference for one or the other. Some are passionate about evangelism and neglect the poor and marginalized, while others focus on the latter to the exclusion of Gospel proclamation. The Roman Catholic Church in New France in some ways lived in the middle of this tension as they zealously evangelized and at the same time cared for orphans, started schools and hospitals, and helped cultivate this European notion of a civil society.

The point of this example is not to delineate between Catholics and Protestants nor does time allow me to delve into the misuses and abuses of power of the church in New France. Instead, this example

brings up the topic of the role of the church in shaping a civil society. What we readily identify in this case study is that there was a definitive attempt to identify with the poor and marginalized. Even the Grey Nuns were actually women of “high social standing” (Jaenen, 1985, p. 21), but they still identified with the poor, the elderly, and the infirm. This identification with the poor and marginalized is key, as John Mark Hicks (2012) writes, “Jesus was born of a poor woman who married a working class ‘day laborer.’ They were so impoverished that they offered ‘two turtle doves,’ the offering ‘provided for the poor’” (Loc. 1240). Hicks then follows up that thought with another, “To minister to the poor is to minister to Jesus” (Loc. 1266).

This identification with the poor is a point of contention for many. As I said earlier, I agree with Um and Buzzard (2013) in *Why Cities Matter* that much Christian literature addressing the city focuses on “typical inner-city issues” (i.e. homelessness, drug abuse, poverty, etc.) and that we need to widen our thinking and approach to cities. On the other hand, we must always consider the poor. However, when it comes to “widening our thinking” in our approach to cities, I believe we can learn much from the case study of the church in New France in that the church not only evangelized but also set up schools, educated children, built orphanages, started colleges, and established hospitals. I would expand this even more to say it is imperative that we have followers of Jesus in all levels of society and government who are policy makers, architects, urban planners, school principals, engineers, and so forth. The church needs them to use these positions of influence to live out their lives as Christians to give consideration to the poor and marginalized.¹³ The church has the power to model this radical ethic as Leong (2012) notes, “If the church is to become a community of belonging both for and with its diverse neighbors in the urban context, then it must consider ethics of redistribution that effectively model care and concern for the poor” (Loc. 2185).

¹³ I believe this gets to the point of what DeYoung and Gilbert were advocating, that Christians (individually) *should* truly be about these things, but it does not fall into the mission of the church (as a body or institution).

Another tension that this case study brings up is in terms of power. How is the church to respond to power? Are we to acquire it or give it away? While the church in New France did serve the least and the last, there was definitely an acquisition of power and influence. This stands in stark contrast to what Rah (2012) writes, “The goal of the incarnate body of Christ in the city is not to grab for earthly power but to be a servant for the city” (Loc. 1684). Not only that, but Rah (2012) also notes, “If the focus of the church becomes the increase of the church’s power in this world, then the church no longer reflects the incarnation of Jesus” (Loc. 1729). This concept of power versus humility in light of Jesus’s incarnation and the posture of the urban church is worth further consideration. What is the church to do with power? Acquire it? Shy away from it? Robert Linthicum (2003) in *Transforming Power* writes about how to leverage and use power to advocate for the poor. The Roman Catholic Church in New France certainly had power; however, we note that it was also used to advocate and care for the poor and marginalized.

All of this feeds into the dialogue of the mission of the urban church. Let me restate my definition, “The mission of the urban church, as God’s covenant community, is to be ambassadors or representatives to the world, seeking the welfare / peace / prosperity of the city for the poor and elite and everyone in between, by extending both arms of grace to the city, common grace and saving grace, knowing God desires to redeem both urban people and urban places.” This brings us back into the conversation of the *missio Dei*. The mission of the urban church then is the *product* of the *missio Dei*. Since the *missio Dei* has both spiritual and physical dimensions, it begins forming how the church is to be engaged in the city.

Bruce Winter (1994) summarizes well our call and role in the city, “The welfare of the city is seen to be two-fold. It was ‘physical’ and ‘spiritual,’ and in the former case it was revolutionary in certain respects. It linked wealthy Christian members of the city into the civic benefaction convention. At the same time, it expanded the definition of ‘benefactor’ to encompass all those in the Christian community who had the capacity to meet the needs of others from self-generated

resources. It required all to be doers of good (p. 201).” We are in the city. The church since its birth has been and is at home in the city. Now the questions comes down to *how* are we going to live out the *missio Dei* in the city?

Afterword

From Antiquity to Modernity

Gailyn Van Rheenen (2010) writes about the need to move from theology to practices to structures, “We reflect on overarching themes of Scripture like the kingdom of God, incarnation, and *missio Dei*—threads interwoven in the narrative of Scripture which form Christian reality. We then ask how these themes are practiced within Christian ministry. These theologies and practices guide us to develop spiritually formative structures commensurate with the theologies and practices” (Loc. 625). My prayer is that we can do the same as this book comes to an end—to move from theological reflection to action. History is a great teacher if we allow the voices and examples from the past to speak into our lives today. As in the case of this book, it is my hope that as we explored the urban trajectory of the *missio Dei* throughout Scripture it will give us a deeper love for cities as well as a larger backdrop in which to see our role as the church in the city.

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About the Author

Coffee and bicycles define Sean's (DMin, Bakke Graduate University) urban existence who believes the best way for exploring cities is on the seat of a bicycle as well as hanging out in third wave coffee shops. Sean is an urban missiologist who works in a creative partnership between TEAM as the Developer of Urban Strategy and Training and the Upstream Collective leading the PDX Loft.

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