

# Cities as Gift and Fallen Places, Judgment and Hope: A Biblical Theology of the City

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## INTRODUCTION

Cities have always been the centerpiece in our conceptions of society. The Bible says a lot about cities past, present, and future that warrants our attention. With well over a thousand uses of the word “city” in the Bible (and even more references to cities by name),<sup>1</sup> the city emerges as a theme running through the biblical meta-narrative.<sup>2</sup> Although a city in the Old Testament looks significantly different than our towering cities of today,<sup>3</sup> there are shared basic components calling us to study the urban theme in the Bible as we examine our cities today.<sup>4</sup> A biblical theology of

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<sup>1</sup> DuBose counts 1,227 appearances of “city” in the RSV. Additionally, cities like Jerusalem and Babylon are mentioned frequently. Rubingh notes 119 different cities mentioned by name in the Bible. DuBose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World*, 101; Rubingh, “The City in the Mission of God,” 5.

<sup>2</sup> Murray, *City Vision*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Frick notes the 1090 references to city (“Ur”) in the OT typically refer to a walled settlement. The need for security has always been a common characteristic of cities. Frick, *The City in Ancient Israel*, 31.

<sup>4</sup> Mills, *Urban Imagination in Biblical Prophecy*, 11; Rogerson and Vincent, *The City in Biblical Perspective*, 4.

the city is imperative to understanding how the church engages cities in our day.<sup>5</sup> An article of this length cannot undertake this monumental task, but can only lift out summary points related to a biblical theology of the city. Urban theology is best developed from themes woven intricately throughout the Scriptures:

What this means is that a biblical theology of the city cannot be made to rest on isolated texts, but will emerge from a process of extended reflection on the message of the patriarchs and prophets of Israel, and of Jesus and his apostles, against the background of the cities which played such a significant part in shaping the context within which their ministries took place. This will prove to be a far more demanding and complex task than creating a 'biblical view of the city' from a few pre-selected proof-texts, but it promises to yield an understanding of the place of the city within the Bible, and within the purposes of God, capable of providing a solid foundation for a credible urban theology.<sup>6</sup>

The Garden of Eden in Genesis 1-2 and the New Jerusalem in Revelation 21-22 form the bookends of the Bible and give us insight into the story arc of the metanarrative. These bookends serve as a significant portrayal of the original design and direction for cities as God intended. Both are ideal pictures of God's design for his creation and the place for God to dwell with humanity (a temple in the truest sense).<sup>7</sup> The presence of the river and tree of life (Gen 2:9-10; Rev 22:1-2) in both places leads us to see the New Jerusalem as the fulfillment of the Garden.<sup>8</sup> Stephen Um and Justin Buzzard unpack this idea further: "This city of peace, which reflects the garden city in Eden with the centralized locus of God's presence, is also a model of the future New Jerusalem, which stands at the center of the world with the temple of God built on top of the city."<sup>9</sup> Throughout the Bible we see how God is forming a people for his great city. It is a story of contrasts: fallenness and gift, judgment and redemption. Augustine captures this contrast as the city of God and the city of man:

[W]e have learned that there is a city of God, and its Founder has inspired us with a love which makes us covet its citizenship. To this Founder of the holy city the citizens of the earthly city prefer their own gods, not knowing that He is the God of gods, not of false, i.e. of impious and proud gods, who, being deprived of His unchangeable and freely communicated light, and so reduced to a kind of poverty-stricken power, eagerly grasp at their own private privileges, and seek divine honours from their deluded subjects.<sup>10</sup>

## FALLEN PLACES

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<sup>5</sup> Mark R. Gornik and Noel Castellanos, "How to Start a Christian Community Development Ministry," in *Restoring At-Risk Communities: Doing It Together and Doing It Right*, ed. John M. Perkins (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1995), 212; "A survey of the literature related to urban ministry reveals that the single greatest need is the formation of an adequate biblical and theological foundation for urban ministry." Wilbur P. Stone, "Reaching Our Cities for Christ," *Malaysia Baptist Theological Seminary Theological Journal* 1 (2003): 81, 83.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations: Theology for an Urban World*, 42.

<sup>7</sup> Beale and Kim, *God Dwells Among Us*, 18, 148.

<sup>8</sup> Aghamkar, *Insights Into Openness: Encouraging Urban Mission*, 13.

<sup>9</sup> Um and Buzzard, *Why Cities Matter*, 63.

<sup>10</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, 345.

The opening chapters of the Bible describe humanity in a complex state. God created everything as good and humanity in particular was created in God's image (Gen 1:27) and created for relationship with God. The earth was the "potential building site" of the city of God.<sup>11</sup> The goodness of creation was fatally disrupted by the fall of humanity. The image of God was distorted and the relationship with God became distant. As it went with humanity, so it went with cities. Cain, cursed to wander the earth because he murdered his brother, was also the first to build a city. Was the act of building a city an act of rebellion?<sup>12</sup> The text is not clear about his motivations. But it does lead to a pattern of human-centered city building that parallels humanity's destructive sinfulness.

The great warrior-hunter and city-builder, Nimrod, built several cities (Gen 10:9-12) including Babel and Nineveh.<sup>13</sup> It was in Babel that humanity sought to build a city that glorified itself rather than God (Gen 11:4) and was "an effort to thwart God's designs."<sup>14</sup> A city without God is a city wrapped up in rebellion against his purposes. Human strength was no match for God's strength and soon the self-glorifying city was left incomplete (v. 8).<sup>15</sup>

The self-seeking nature of humanity that caused the building of Babel was further perpetuated in the cities of the earth. In Genesis 18 we are given another glimpse of cities that do not have God as their foundation. Sodom and Gomorrah forever stand out as symbols of sinfulness. It is not a story of God exacting vengeance; it is a story of God responding to an outcry. Unhindered sin is destructive and oppressive.<sup>16</sup> Abraham interceded on behalf of these cities, bargaining with God to preserve the city if ten righteous men could be found there (v. 32). The most troubling element was that not even ten righteous men could be found. That meant that even those who cried out to God (v. 21) were participants in some way in the wickedness of the city. We are reminded again and again that these two cities were no worse than Jerusalem itself (Is 3:9; Jer 23:14; Matt 10:15; 11:23-24). Nineveh, Babylon, and the cities of Egypt were no less full of oppression. Exploitation of labor, sexual deviation, and all forms of idolatry spilled over from these cities into empires under their respective thumbs. A city without God is fallen.

## THE GIFT

One could easily focus on the negative image we get from Babel, Sodom and Gomorrah and conclude that cities are innately evil. After all, if each person is utterly sinful then it only makes sense to conclude that cities would be amplifications of human sinfulness. But the Bible does not offer such a simplistic view of cities. Cities offer much that is good, as we see in Psalm 107:4-9, where God himself leads people "by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in" (v 7, ESV).

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<sup>11</sup> Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 14.

<sup>12</sup> Ellul interprets Cain's act of building a city as unequivocally rebellious. Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Historically, little is known about Nimrod. Even though he has been the subject of much speculation, the biblical record seems to point towards an early king from Mesopotamia. There are some who consider Nimrod to be an aggregation of several enemy kings of the Jews and thus is symbolized as the "evil king". Levin, "Nimrod the Mighty, King of Kish, King of Sumer and Akkad."

<sup>14</sup> Seitz, "The Two Cities in Christian Scripture," 19.

<sup>15</sup> Conn, "Genesis as Urban Prologue," 21.

<sup>16</sup> We have been quick to reduce the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah to homosexuality. Ezek 16:48-50 and Jer 23:14 makes it clear that the two cities were morally vile on a number of counts.

The Promised Land was not empty and undeveloped. Rather, it was a land full of ready-built cities with infrastructure. The gift of cities in the Promised Land is stated explicitly in Deuteronomy 6:10-12. Brown and Carroll note that cities are intentionally included in God's gift of a land to his people: "The city is an integral feature of the theological topography of the promised land, no less than God's gift to Israel."<sup>17</sup> The cities of Canaan were seen as good gifts in which God's people could flourish.

The Bible is always aware of human sinfulness and points us toward God's plan for redemption. God uses cities to symbolize places of redemption. The sanctuary cities described in Deuteronomy 19, Numbers 35 and Joshua 20 are places set apart for those who committed manslaughter to be saved from the punishment due them. These cities stood as a reminder to all of God's justice as well as loving kindness and were established under the direction of God himself.<sup>18</sup>

Cities, then, demonstrate they are a part of God's common grace.<sup>19</sup> Even from the time of Cain in Genesis 4, cities allowed for a division of labor which then allowed for innovation and the arts (Gen 4:20-21). The cities of Canaan had cisterns, vineyards and orchards that were essential for them to thrive. Further, cities provided security and order that protected the inhabitants from chaos and crime outside the city walls. Cities were and are gifts from God.

As the temple of the Lord was built in the conquered city of Jerusalem, the notion of the "city of God" began to form (1 Kings 11:36; 14:21; 2 Kings 21:4; Neh 11:1).<sup>20</sup> When the temple was established, Jerusalem took on significance far beyond its real estate value.<sup>21</sup> Alexander notes: "As the dwelling place of God on earth, the temple-city of Jerusalem is in miniature what God intends for the whole world."<sup>22</sup> A number of Psalms are oriented to the city of God.<sup>23</sup> Here are a few examples of Psalms declaring God's glory through the city:

"Sing praises to the Lord, who sits enthroned in Zion!  
Tell among the peoples his deeds!" Ps 9:11<sup>24</sup>

"Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised in the city of our God!  
His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King." Ps 48:1-2

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<sup>17</sup> Brown and Carroll, "The Garden and the Plaza: Biblical Images of the City," 7.

<sup>18</sup> DuBose, *How Churches Grow in an Urban World*, 104.

<sup>19</sup> Benesh, *The Urbanity of the Bible*, 17.

<sup>20</sup> Jerusalem, was a city with Canaanite pagan roots. Even God's choice of a city once devoted to another god/gods is a picture of the redemptive work of God. D. F. Payne, "Jerusalem," ed. D. R. W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester: England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

<sup>21</sup> Spencer, "What City Are We Creating?"

<sup>22</sup> Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Key among these "songs of Zion" are Psalms 46, 48, 84, 87, and 122. Linthicum considers forty-nine of the Psalms to be urban Psalms. Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 655; Linthicum, *City of God, City of Satan*, 29.

<sup>24</sup> All Bible quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are from the *English Standard Version*, (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

“On the holy mount stands the city he founded;  
the Lord loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwelling places of Jacob.  
Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God.” Ps 87:1-3

“The Lord is great in Zion; he is exalted over all the peoples.” Ps 99:2

“For the Lord builds up Zion; he appears in his glory.” Ps 102:16

“... that they may declare in Zion the name of the Lord, and in Jerusalem his praise,  
when peoples gather together, and kingdoms, to worship the Lord.” Ps 102:21-22

“For the Lord has chosen Zion; he has desired it for his dwelling place:  
‘This is my resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it.’” Ps 132:13-14

“Blessed be the Lord from Zion, he who dwells in Jerusalem!  
Praise the Lord!” Ps 135:21

“The Lord will reign forever, your God, O Zion, to all generations.  
Praise the Lord!” Ps 146:10

Jerusalem became the place of God’s “holy habitation” (Ps 46:4) on earth and thus became an unconquerable city that made kings shudder (Ps 48:3-8). The marked difference between Babel and the ideal Jerusalem is that God is at the center of Jerusalem’s beauty, justice, and peace in such a way that God is glorified by the city (Ps 87:3). Tragically, Jerusalem failed to live up to its status as the city of God, and God’s glory departed from the city (Ezek 10).

## THE CITY OF MAN JUDGED

Cities are intended by God for good and for human flourishing (*shalom*<sup>25</sup>). And, yet, cities continually default to becoming self-seeking places of human pride and oppression. God gave the nation of Israel the land of Canaan along with the cities which should have ushered in the golden age for Israel. But, “the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord” (Judg 6:1). God gave them judges, but society quickly turned back to evil. God gave them kings, but this, too, did not stop the perpetuation of evil.

The prophets call attention to the evil that seemed only to fester in urban settlements (Mic 6:9-16). Nineveh and Babylon (Babel), cities built by Nimrod, each expanded into fearsome empires. Nineveh had become prideful to the point of using divine language for itself (Zeph 2:13-15) and was deceitful and bloodthirsty (Nah 3:1). Babylon, too, had become prideful due to its imposing rule over the known world and extoling themselves as equal to God (Is 14:13-14; 46:1-7).<sup>26</sup> Several

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<sup>25</sup> “We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. In the Bible, *shalom* means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight*—a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights. *Shalom*, in other words, is the way things ought to be.” Plantinga, *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be*, 9–10.

<sup>26</sup> Mumford, *The City in History*, 216; Kostof, *The City Shaped*, 226.

prophets condemn the oppressive acts of Babylon and tell of its impending fall (Hab 1-3; Is 13-14; Jer 50-51). Throughout the Bible, Babylon emerges to epitomize the city of man, a city without God.<sup>27</sup> Ellul elucidates further: “All the cities of the world are brought together in her, she is the synthesis of them all (Dan. 3 and 4; Rev 14 and 18). She is the head of, and the standard for the other cities. When the wrath of God is loosed, she is struck first. When she is struck, all other cities are struck in her.”<sup>28</sup> Even though Babylon epitomizes the city of man, every other city reveals similar evil tendencies, even Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was anointed by God’s special presence and called to be the city that would reveal the glory of God to the nations (Ps 122:6-9; Is 43:10). Among all cities, Jerusalem was the best hope for a righteous city. However, even Jerusalem failed to be good and righteous as proposed by God.<sup>29</sup> Jerusalem, the intended centerpiece of godly civilization, proved to be worse than the surrounding pagan nations (Ezek 5:5-8).<sup>30</sup> Jeremiah concluded that Jerusalem must be punished because “there is nothing but oppression within her” (Jer 6:6). The whole book of Isaiah is structured around the contrast between the Jerusalem of man and the Jerusalem of God’s design.<sup>31</sup> Isaiah opens with a stinging indictment on the city as sinful beyond even Sodom and Gomorrah, leading God to avert his attention away from Jerusalem (1:4-15). In the midst of Isaiah’s judgment on Jerusalem and God’s impending destruction, the prophet points God’s people toward a future city of God that will not fail to be the place of justice, holiness, and worship of him. Jerusalem and every city in history falls short of being cities that honor God (cf. 26:1-6; 60; 65:17-25).

## THE CITY OF GOD REDEEMED

Isaiah 26 tells of a strong city (using apocalyptic language) that only the faithful righteous may enter. The problem is that all of humanity has disqualified themselves from entering God’s city because “your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God” (Is 59:2, ESV). It was this sinful world in which Christ entered as a new start for humanity (Rom 5:12-2) and became the ultimate high priest (Heb 4:14-16). Throughout the biblical narrative, humanity’s righteousness can only come from God. Christ made this possible through his sacrifice on the cross and resurrection. We are invited to place our identity in Christ and therefore become citizens in a new community, one that is a *new humanity* (Eph 2:15) and a *royal priesthood* (1 Pet 2:9). Christ became the foundation (Eph 2:20) for the city of God, who is the architect and builder (Heb 11:10). Seitz summarizes it thus: “In the New Testament, Jesus becomes the place of God’s habitation.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Not without good reason is Babylon used as an archetype of the city of man. Toynbee observes that Babylon was the ultimate imperial city, serving as capital for a series of empires spanning one and half millennia (18<sup>th</sup> century BCE to 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE). Toynbee, “Cities in History,” 16.

<sup>28</sup> Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 20.

<sup>29</sup> Murray, *City Vision*, 29.

<sup>30</sup> “In this way the church will be the holy city within the city until Christ comes again to redeem the faithful and the heavenly Jerusalem comes down to claim its eternal citizens.” Seitz, “The Two Cities in Christian Scripture,” 14.

<sup>31</sup> The city motif is found throughout Isaiah, using interchangeable terms: Jerusalem, Zion, mount/mountain, and city. “City” is used fifty-five times in Isaiah, “Jerusalem” is used forty-nine times, “Zion” is used forty-seven times, and “mountain” is used fifty-seven times. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, 16–17; Kim, “The City in Isaiah 24-27: A Theological Interpretation in Terms of Judgment and Salvation,” 121.

<sup>32</sup> Seitz, “The Two Cities in Christian Scripture,” 15.

Throughout the Bible, there has been a distinction between most people who have allegiance to themselves or other objects of worship and those who have placed their allegiance in God. Outward displays of religiosity are not the true indicators of those who have turned their affections to God (cf. Is 58; Amos 5:21-27). Cities as a the public body<sup>33</sup> display the natural sinful nature of humanity. In Christ, people are being redeemed and formed as a distinct body, that of Christ (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12-27). Where, God is drawing people in each city who will become the “city on a hill” (Matt 5:14; cf. Is 2:1-4; Mic 4:1-4) in the midst of our burgeoning cities (Acts 18:10).<sup>34</sup>

No city is beyond redemption. Some of the most brutal cities in history are shown as loved by God. Nineveh, a tyrannical city, seemed beyond repentance.<sup>35</sup> Yet, in God’s mercy, he sent the prophet Jonah with a message of repentance (Jon 3:2). Even the most recalcitrant city can repent. God loves people, and cities are full of people. Thus, we can conclude that God loves cities, because the welfare of urban dwellers is inextricably intertwined with cities (Jer 29:7; Jon 4:11). Through Christ, people become citizens of God’s city-in-the-making.

The New Jerusalem is the center piece of the new heavens and new earth described in Revelation. The Bible gives a beautiful snapshot of this city as a place without pain, death, and housing problems. This City of God is one that is composed of people from every language and tribe (Is 60; Rev 5:9-10; 7:9-10). Like the Garden of Eden, the New Jerusalem is described as a temple, the dwelling place of God: “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev 21:3, ESV). This is the end vision. As we move toward the New Jerusalem, it is the church’s responsibility to create outposts of the city of God in the midst of our cities and to the ends of the earth. “Christians therefore have a great role to play in seeing that these plans are fulfilled.”<sup>36</sup>

## **THE CITY OF GOD IN THE MIDST OF THE CITY OF MAN: THE CALLING OF THE CHURCH IN THE CITY**

The city, understood biblically, leads us to understand it in two categories: the city of man and the city of God. The complication is that these cities are intertwined in this present age (Matt 13:24-30). A biblical framework for the city helps provide a theological understanding of the city and how the church should engage the city. Below are six implications for the church, based on a biblical framework of the city.

### **Cities are Places of Common Grace**

Place matters. This is not just a sociological observation but also a theological assertion. Throughout the Bible, God has created, given, and anointed particular places, including cities. The cities of Canaan were gifts to steward and Jerusalem, a city marked by God’s presence, was to shine brilliantly to the surrounding nations. God delights in dwelling (a place-bound activity) with

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<sup>33</sup> Sennett, *Flesh and Stone*, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Seitz, “The Two Cities in Christian Scripture,” 27.

<sup>35</sup> Ellul states: “She is so warlike that she is almost presented as the personification of war.” Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Choge, “A City with Foundations: A Biblical Understanding of the City and God’s Mission in It,” 29.

his people. Earlier we observed that Jesus now dwells in each of us. We make a mistake if we take that to mean, that place no longer matters. Rather, we now extend the dwelling of Christ, as we dwell in cities. Rosalee Velloso Ewell writes: “Dwelling in the city (or anywhere else) has to be personal. It is sharing the love of Jesus one person at a time, even in a city of millions.”<sup>37</sup> The very presence of Christians in cities as once-hardened sinners transformed by God’s grace begins to establish the city of God in the midst of fallen places.

The very act of gathering as the church in a city is an act of spiritual place-making. Faithful churches, transformed by the gospel will then become a community that upends the status quo that reinforces corruption, greed, and other forms of systemic sin in the city. Churches in our cities are called to seek the common good of all so that others may glorify God (Jer 29:7; Matt 5:16; 1 Pet 2:12). The passage in 1 Peter 2 makes it clear that the church should be involved in public good.<sup>38</sup> Since cities are places of common grace, God’s covenant people joint-stakeholders for the cities. We therefore seek its welfare for the common good and must not shirk from this responsibility. We serve and love the city because we long for the citizens of our cities to join in worshipping God.

## **Cities are Filled with People in need of Redemption**

Although cities have good qualities, they are full of sinful people, that accumulate to systemic, institutional, and entrenched sin. While kings and priests are accountable as leaders, the biblical narrative is unequivocal in stating that all people are culpable for their own sin. The Bible is clear that we are incapable of rooting out sin on our own and must turn in faith to Jesus as our Savior (2 Cor 5:21). One of the most important roles the church can have in the city is the consistent proclamation of the gospel to all urban dwellers (Matt 28:18-20; Acts 1:8). The intentional presence of the Body of Christ in a city is the primary way the city comes to know Christ.

## **Cities are Strategic**

The early Christian movement was almost entirely urban.<sup>39</sup> If we can trace the footsteps of Paul, they will lead us to city after city, including many of the most influential urban centers in the Roman Empire.<sup>40</sup> From these cities, the gospel went out to the countryside “pagans” (Acts 13:49; 19:10; 1 Thess. 1:7-9; Col. 4:12-13).<sup>41</sup> Today, influence and cultural change flows from the cities to the countryside. If we want the nations to know Christ, we must create a beachhead in the key cities of the nations. People from every people group are coming to cities like never before and are more open to the gospel in cities.

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<sup>37</sup> Ewell, “The Word on the Street: Biblical Reflections on God’s Reign in the City,” 25.

<sup>38</sup> See Crane, *Sowing Seeds of Change*, 42–51.

<sup>39</sup> Stark, *Cities of God*, 26; Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Volume I: Beginnings to 1500*, 75.

<sup>40</sup> Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 9, 44.

<sup>41</sup> “Early Christianity was primarily an urban movement. The original meaning of the word pagan (*paganus*) was ‘rural person,’ or more colloquially ‘country hick.’ It came to have religious meaning because after Christianity had triumphed in the cities, most of the rural people remained unconverted.” Stark, *Cities of God*, 2.



We must establish churches that are positioned to proclaim Christ to the masses coming to the cities. This means we need to diligently plant churches that worship in all of the languages spoken in the city and in every neighborhood of the urban agglomeration. Because cities attract and create diversity, we especially need intercultural churches, where all are welcome.<sup>42</sup> It is the kind of church we see beautifully described in Acts 13:1-3, bringing diverse people together through Christ. This is done through churches firmly established in the gospel multiplying in cities.

## Churches as Royal Priesthood

We must reflect on what it means for the church to be a royal priesthood (Ex 19:6; 1 Pet 2:9) in the midst of our cities. Biblical scholars tell us the description of the New Jerusalem in Revelation is that of the temple (the holy of holies especially) described in the Old Testament.<sup>43</sup> T.D. Alexander asserts: “God’s original blueprint is for the whole earth to become a temple-city filled with people who have a holy or priestly status.”<sup>44</sup> The church is not called to itself, it is called to tell the nations of the available invitation into the kingdom of God because of the perfect sacrifice of the high priest (Heb 4:14). The church becomes the new temple of God (1 Cor 3:16-17; 1 Pet 2:4-5).<sup>45</sup> Alexander spells out the implications for the church: “Wherever the followers of Jesus meet, God is present with them by his Spirit. Consequently, as the church expands throughout the earth, God’s dwelling place is also extended.”<sup>46</sup>

## Churches as Prophetic Presence

Christians live in cities of man while maintaining allegiance to the City of God. The prophets of the Old Testament called on rulers and citizens to destroy their idols, abolish injustice and oppression, and live upright, God-honoring lives (e.g. Is 1:16-23). The church continues this important task, calling for a society that pursues godliness and justice for all who dwell in the cities. The church is governed by different principles, living as if already citizens of the new city to come, the New Jerusalem. In following the prophets, the church does not take on the role of government but serves as an example and voice calling people to God by forming a society that reflects God’s character.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> For more on intercultural/multicultural churches, see: Chan, “The Intercultural Church: Moving Beyond Mere Statistical Expressions of Multiethnicity”; Woo, *The Color of Church: A Biblical and Practical Paradigm for Multiracial Churches*; Crane, “Multicultural Churches in Global Cities.”

<sup>43</sup> Beale, “Eden, the Temple, and the Church’s Mission in the New Creation,” 6; Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation*, 127.

<sup>44</sup> Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 30.

<sup>45</sup> “The thought of Christ’s body as a temple is the theological basis for the description of the church as a temple. The Gospel of John presents Jesus as the new temple. The interpretation of the temple as the body of Jesus in John 2:19-22 may be an example of Johannine double meaning: the physical body as the tabernacle of God (cf. John 1:14, ‘tabernacled among us’) and the church as the new temple (for God and Christ’s dwelling in believers, cf. John 14:23).” Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 127.

<sup>46</sup> Alexander, *From Eden to the New Jerusalem*, 18.

<sup>47</sup> This topic of the church’s role in politics is complex and has many perspectives. Although, it is overly simplistic, it is important for the church to see itself under the rule of Christ primarily and to speak to local governments as an ambassador might in a foreign country.

## Churches as Foretaste

The church is built on the foundation of Christ (Eph 2:20) which looks forward to the New Jerusalem (2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:27; Rev 21:2). As such, the church becomes an outpost of the City of God in the midst of our cities of man.<sup>48</sup> As an alternative society, the church then demonstrates to the world new life in Christ and offers a foretaste of the city to come.<sup>49</sup> The church demonstrates the goodness of the gospel by living differently than the world around them.<sup>50</sup> The church is a family that is inclusive and proactive in including those from different ethnic backgrounds, socio-economic classes, and languages (Gal 3:27-29). Even those who have been ostracized by society are invited into the family of Christ. The church also seeks to love the surrounding city through intercessory prayer, active civic involvement and service.

## CONCLUSION

It is vital for the people of God to engage cities with a theological framework of cities and their purpose in God's divine plan. This brief survey of the theme of the city in the Bible can only offer the broadest overview. We know from this survey that cities are both gifts of God and hopelessly fallen due to sin. We also know that God loves all cities because he loves people. There is no city is beyond miraculous transformation through the saving work of Jesus Christ. Those who turn to Christ become citizens (Eph 2:19) in the city to come, the New Jerusalem. This City of God has the presence of God himself dwelling with his people, and people from every nation are present bringing the honor and glory of each nation (Rev 21:26) as a contribution to this glorious future city. Our task in the city "as a Church is to be God's temple, so filled with his presence that we expand and fill the earth with that glorious presence until God finally accomplishes this goal completely at the end of time!"<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> "Hebrews itself, after calling its readers to come to "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (12: 22), exhorts its listeners to live as followers of Christ: loving one another, entertaining strangers, being empathetic to those who are suffering and willing to suffer for Christ's sake, honoring marriage, being content with what one has, imitating and obeying good leaders, following right doctrine, praising and confessing Jesus, doing good, sharing with others, and praying for each other (13: 1-18)." Spencer, "What City Are We Creating?," 22.

<sup>49</sup> Guder et al., *Missional Church*, 100.

<sup>50</sup> Newbigin suggests that a congregation of believers is the primary hermeneutic of the gospel to the world. Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 227.

<sup>51</sup> Beale, "Eden, the Temple, and the Church's Mission in the New Creation," 31.

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