ACADEMIA│Letters

Local Yet Connected: Towards An Ecclesiology for the Urban Context

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The nature and posture of the church in urban settings has been given too little attention. In many respects, churches function as if they are in tight-knit smaller towns, assuming mutual trust, established relationships, and community. Churches have given into superficial tribalizations (ethnic homogeneity, partisan political affiliations, and other more subtle ques like dress, jargon, or unexplained rituals).[1] Well-intentioned churches are often slow to respond and engage swift-moving urban society.[2] In order for the church to thrive in the city, fresh thinking is necessary.[3] Moreover, "structural differentiation" is exigent if the church aims to address needs in the broader society.[4]

The phrase "local church" has gained popularity in usage in recent years, but seldom includes thoughtful reflection on the locality of the local church. The very notion of "local" is not easy to define. There is an argument to consider physical and nonphysical spaces as localities: "Locality today is rendered more complex because people live in both spatial and virtual neighborhoods."[5] This blurred understanding of what is local pushes people to a de-

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[1]James Thompson traces a strong bias towards individualism that has impacted how we conceive of church today. James W. Thompson, *The Church According to Paul: Rediscovering the Community Conformed to Christ* (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Academic, 2014), 8.

[2]Eddie Gibbs, *ChurchMorph: How Megatrends Are Reshaping Christian Communities* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 12.

[3]Smith, *City Signals: Principles and Practices for Ministering in Today's Global Communities*, 59.

[4]J. Timothy Kauffman, "Structures, Injustice, and Insensitivity: Who Is the Neighbor Anyway?," in *God So Loves the City: Seeking a Theology for Urban Mission*, ed. Charles Van Engen and Jude Tiersma (Monrovia, Calif.: MARC, 1994), 44.

[5]Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective (The Missional Network): Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapid, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 128.

tachment with a particular place. "This social pattern of disintegration fosters our lifestyle, which means that it is very difficult to bring the differing parts of our lives together."[6]

Cities are full of diverse people spread over vast and complicated geography. I lived in the Los Angeles Metro Area where it can easily take an hour to go fifteen miles. Churches (particularly in the Free Church tradition) have had a tendency to be ruggedly independent, preferring to do everything on their own (it is perhaps another casualty of urban choice-driven culture). Churches as well as people can become individualistic. Lesslie Newbigin noted the negative outcome of this tendency: "When numerical growth is taken as the criterion of judgment on the church, we are transported with alarming ease into the world of the military campaign or the commercial sales drive."[7] How do we maintain a strong understanding of the local church while also addressing the needs of the city?

The Bible challenges an overly independent posture of each local church. Divisions in the church are disruptive to the witness of Christ in a city. Divisions within the church of a city are amplified by divisiveness already present in every city.[8] The metaphors used for the church communicate a universality connected through Christ.[9] We are branches to the one vine (John 15:1-7). We are the body led by one head (Rom 12:4-8; 1 Cor 12:12-31). We are the bride of one groom (Eph 5:25-32. These images are powerful because they instruct our understanding of the local congregation as well as our connection to the universal church. In other words, we are simultaneously part of a local church and the broader church. The church, then, "as the gospel, has a breadth and a life that transcends the local experience."[10]

When the church in Jerusalem ballooned rapidly to have thousands of believers, it was untenable to gather meaningfully in one place. The language used in Acts 2 indicates the church of Jerusalem was worthy of note, representing a "microcosm of the city."[11] The biblical material is not clear on what this looked like. Although an argument could be made for one large church gathering at the temple (c.f. Acts 5:12), there is little to support this argument. The church primarily met in homes which at the largest, would have held no more than fifty people. Most would have been smaller. "Thus our modern experience of church must be

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[6]Eddie Gibbs, *Rebirth Of The Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Publishing Group, 2013), 54.

[7]Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission,* Rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), 125.

[8]Piet Naudé, "African Urbanisms: Reinterpreting the Marks of the Church," *Stellenbosch Theological Journal*, no. 2 (2015): 75.

[9]For the most comprehensive catalogue of the metaphors used for the church in the Bible, see: Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

[10]Helen Doohan, *Paul's Vision of Church* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1989), 133.

[11]David A. Fiensy, "The Composition of the Jerusalem Church," in *The Books of Acts in Its First Century Setting: Volume IV: The Book of Acts in Its Palestinian Setting*, ed. Richard Bauckham (Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: William B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press, 1995), 213.

put to one side as we try to visualize church life in the first and second centuries."[12] Even so, Luke uses the singular of *ekklesia* to refer the Christians in Jerusalem.[13] In Acts 5:11 and 8:1 "it is unlikely that the reference is to a congregation actually gathered for corporate worship and edification, since we know that the Jerusalem Christians met in various house groups."[14] At the same time references to local congregations in multiple locations used the plural "churches" (Acts 15:41; 16:5). If in fact, the Jerusalem church met in multiple home-based churches, then passages used to argue that decision-making is based in the local church (cf. Acts 6:2-3; 15:22) might be addressing the collected church of the city.[15]

Just as we can talk about each local congregation in a city, we can also speak of the church of a city. The biblical use of *ekklesia* demonstrates this in several locations. In both Corinth and Rome there was a plurality of home-based churches (cf. Rom 16:5a, 10b, 11b, 14, 15).[16] At the same time, Paul's letters refer to the whole church (*holēstēsekklēsias*[17]) in each city (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor 14:23). This does not diminish the responsibility of each local congregation to be the church to its fullest extent. Roger Gehring summarizes Paul's understanding of local congregations by saying "It is always 'church' whenever individuals gather together *en ekklēsia* (1 Cor 11:18)."[18] Yet, it should also be acknowledged that these local congregations cannot conceive of themselves as thoroughly separate entities and that they do compose the church of the city. I am suggesting that local congregations, joined together by the same Christ, need each other to fulfill the purpose of the church. "The church never exists for itself but is always in relation to God and the world; therefore it is a serving, missionary church."[19]

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[12]Kevin Giles, "Church," in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 195.

[13]Luke uses *ekklesia* with some elasticity, referring to a local congregation, referring to the collective congregations of a city, and even referring to the church in all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria. Kendell H. Easley, "The Church in Acts and Revelation: New Testament Bookends," in *The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church*, ed. Kendell H. Easley and Christopher W. Morgan (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013), 67–69.

[14]David G. Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Nottingham, England: Eerdmans; Apollos, 2009), 94; Kendell Easley affirms this reading. Kendell H. Easley, "The Church in Acts and Revelation: New Testament Bookends," in *The Community of Jesus: A Theology of the Church*, ed. Kendell H. Easley and Christopher W. Morgan (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2013), 81.

[15]The reference to Acts 15:22 is complicated by the uniqueness of this event and that the decisions were made for the church more broadly than Jerusalem.

[16]Reta Halteman Finger, *Roman House Churches for Today: A Practical Guide for Small Groups* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2007); Roger Gehring, *House Church and Mission: The Importance of Household Structures in Early Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 9.

[17]James Dunn sees an echo in the LXX when Israel's representatives assemble for meeting or worship (Deut 31:30; Josh 8:35 [LXX 9:2f.]; 1 Sam 17:47; 1 Kgs 8:14, 22, 55; 12:3 A; etc.). James D. G. Dunn, *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 38B, Romans 9-16* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), 910.

[18]Gehring, *House Church and Mission*, 164.

[19]Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical & Global Perspectives* (Down-

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The long-held marks of the church state that the church is "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic." These marks acknowledge an essential unity of the one church and embrace a unified missional vocation. Each local church has a responsibility to care for those within the local congregation. But it also has an obligation to collaborate for the sake of proclaiming the gospel of Jesus Christ. Although each local church is complete within itself and has the freedom and authority to make their own decisions, it does not mean they are to cut themselves off from the broader church. "Autonomy is not isolation."[20] When churches spend a lot money on branding and building and developing their own kingdoms[21] it sends a message to the city that is contradictory to the message of Christ and his one, everlasting kingdom.

Conclusion

Many expressions of church life are inadequate for reaching and discipling those in hyperdiverse, hyper-mobile cities. This paper briefly looks at ecclesiology in the urban context and considerations for improved community engagement of the church.

Relatively little has been written pertaining specifically to ecclesiology in urban contexts. As such, this paper remains as a preliminary investigating of these issues. More theological work needs to be done in this area both in terms of ecclesiology as well as missiology.

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ers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 129.

[20] Ferguson, *The Church of Christ*, 345.

[21] Seely and Pues point out that even our attempts at collaboration through networks and interchurch organizations can sometimes reinforce tribalisms and private kingdom building. Seely and Pues, *Servant Partnership: A Practical Guide for Gospel-Motivated Collaboration in Your City,* 11.

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