

A VISION FOR OUR CITIES

[ALLAN BARTH]

As the main purveyor of influence to surrounding communities, the city is where culture is formed. The Christian desire to shape culture with the gospel therefore requires Christians to live and be active in the city.

In Jeremiah 29, God told the Israelites who had been taken into Babylonian captivity, “Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jer. 29:5–7).

While the Jews were living in that place, they were to engage fully in life, even in the life of a city that was ostensibly opposed to God. Even though the Lord gives them a self-oriented reason for doing so—“if it prospers, you too will prosper”—the fact remains that he is telling them to seek, work for, pursue, and be concerned for the peace and prosperity of that place.

It was a pretty radical idea—that God’s people should work for the good of people who are not living in right relationship to him. That, however, is what he tells the Israelites. This may sound radical to us today, but it is very much in accord with what Jesus deemed to be the second greatest commandment, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). It is right in line with the idea that Israel, God’s people at that time, was to be a “blessing for the nations” (Gen. 12:3). And it is right in line with John 3:16, “For God so loved the world . . .”

Repeatedly throughout the Scriptures, we see God’s concern for cities and the people within them, both those inhabited and dominated by his people, like Jerusalem, and those that were not, such as Nineveh and Babylon. God is just as concerned today about cities as he was back then, and therefore so should we.

There are many reasons why we ought to be concerned about the city, not the least of which are the following:

1. The cities are where people are and increasingly will be.
2. The cities are the key centers of influence culturally, spiritually, and in nearly every other way.
3. The city is God’s invention, part of God’s plan and purpose, and as such should not be regarded as evil. Life in a city is our eventual destiny—or at least our eternal destiny will revolve around a city.

THE CITIES ARE WHERE PEOPLE ARE AND INCREASINGLY WILL BE

In 1900, 10 percent of the world’s population was urban. By 2005, more than 50 percent of the world’s population had become urban. And the trend is accelerating.

- + By 2010 there will be 23 cities in the world with populations in excess of 10 million.
- + By 2020 more than 25 cities will have populations in excess of 11 million.
- + By 2050 more than 25 cities will have populations in excess of 16 million.

+ By 2050 four of the top five will be mega-giant cities of 40 million or more (Lagos, Karachi, Bombay, Dhaka, and Calcutta). And here is a sobering fact: four of those five are likely to be hostile to Christianity.¹

At the end of the book of Jonah, God asks the prophet a rhetorical question in reference to Nineveh, which at that time would have been one of the largest and most powerful cities in the world and was one of the most hostile to the God of the Bible: “Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jonah 4:11) The expected answer, much to Jonah’s chagrin, was “Of course.”

God cares about people. He cares about us. We don’t really understand why. We certainly don’t deserve his love; yet he has chosen to love us, no matter our ethnic identity, whether we are rich or poor, young or old, educated or uneducated, male or female, Jew or Gentile, moral or immoral.

God cares about people, their suffering and pain, their heartaches and trials, the oppression they experience, the injustice they bear. He is a God of compassion. He wants his creatures to experience joy, love, and peace. The logic is pretty simple: God loves people, the human creatures he has brought into being. Cities are where most of them live. Therefore, God cares about cities. And if God cares about the cities and the people who live there, so should we.

THE CITIES ARE KEY CENTERS OF INFLUENCE CULTURALLY, SPIRITUALLY AND IN NEARLY EVERY OTHER WAY

“As the cities go, so go the nations of the world.”² Cities are the main purveyors of culture, values, and belief. The cities are where culture is formed. They are the centers for education, the arts, music, literature, film, television, other media, and so much else.

Whatever develops in the city tends to have a profound effect throughout the nation and often the world. Influence tends to move from the city outward, not inward (note examples such as hip hop, fashion, and acceptance of alternative lifestyles). In America in the latter half of the twentieth century, many churches left the cities and moved out to the suburbs. Today many evangelical Christians in the United States bemoan the fact that they have lost their influence on the culture. But the reason is obvious: they are no longer in the cities.

Paul recognized the influence of cities in the Roman world. Because he went to the cities, he won the known world of his day. The cities became centers of belief. (Interestingly, the word *pagan* comes from *paganus*, which means “rural” or “rustic.”) The countryside was regarded as unbelieving, while the cities came to be known as Christian. By the year 300 AD, more than half of the urban population of the Roman Empire had become Christian, and it would be only a few years before Christianity would become, in effect, its official religion.

We continue to ignore the cities at our own peril. “Great metropolitan regions—not cities, not states, not even the nation states—are starting to emerge as the world’s most influential players.”³

THE CITY IS GOD’S INVENTION, PART OF HIS PLAN AND PURPOSE, AND AS SUCH SHOULD NOT BE REGARDED AS EVIL

Many people think that had Adam and Eve not sinned, they would have developed a perfect city. The various commands given to Adam are appropriately understood to mean that Adam was to build a civilization that would glorify God (Gen. 1:27–28). He was to multiply, fill, and subdue the earth—in other words, bringing order and creating beauty, developing culture and a society that would honor God and be enjoyed by all who

¹ Figures taken from David B. Barrett, George Thomas Kurian, Todd M. Johnson, *World Christian Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (Oxford University Press, 2001), 2:537.

² Roger Greenway, “The Challenge of the Cities,” in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, 3rd ed. (Pasadena: William Carey, 1999), 553-558.

³ Neal Peirce, “The ‘Citistates’ Are on the Rise, and the Competition is Fierce,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 26 July 1993, A11.

experienced it. Although this may seem a bit of a stretch, we think that this ultimately means city building. Cities are the primary places where we see all of these activities happening. Indeed, in Revelation 21 our future is pictured as life in a city, or at least as revolving around a city, the New Jerusalem that comes down out of heaven. Hebrews 11:10 describes Abraham as “looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

In the Old Testament, cities were appointed as places of refuge and shelter for the weak, places where the strong and weak could thrive, places where people could find justice and escape from endless cycles of vengeance and the tyranny of the strong. Even today, the city is where minorities can cluster for support in an alien land, where immigrants can gain a foothold on a new life, where refugees can find shelter, and where the poor and homeless can eke out an existence. The city has always been a more merciful place for minorities of all kinds. The realities of the city may often be harsh, but the countryside can be far worse. The weak and powerless need cities. Although cities are often very rough and difficult places, at least people can survive in them.

CITIES TEND TO STIMULATE AND FOCUS THE GIFTS, TALENTS, CAPACITIES AND DEEP POTENTIAL OF HUMAN HEARTS AND MINDS

Cities become culture and knowledge development centers. It is a peculiar thing, but cities tend to affect us. They put you together with people unlike you, which tends to stretch your thinking and challenge your perspectives. They put you together with people who are like you as well—people who are just as good as or better than you at what you do—which tends to make you better at what you do. This unique exposure to like and unlike, and the concentration of human talent coupled with competition and collaboration, produces greater art, science, technology, and business. It often generates solutions to key problems that humanity faces.

CITIES ARE PLACES OF SPIRITUAL SEARCHING

Ancient cities were usually built around ziggurats—the original skyscrapers. These were temples where a particular god was thought to come down. Cities were the royal residences of the gods, and a city was often dedicated to its god. When the God of the Bible creates a new city in the wilderness, he does so by coming to dwell with his people in the tabernacle. Later, in Jerusalem, the temple stands as the central integrating point of the city. Cities tend to excite spiritual inquiry, both good and bad. The turmoil, the striving, and all that a city becomes seem to turn people into religious seekers. As Christians abandoned the cities of America, it became easier for people in the cities to turn to false gods, such as power, fame, possessions, privilege, and comfort. The city is a place of amazing spiritual openness.

As I have stated, the city is God’s invention, part of his plan and purpose, and as such should be regarded as part of God’s good creation rather than as inherently evil. *But because of human sin, the city’s power for refuge, for cultural development, and for spiritual stimulus can actually work against the purposes of God.*

- + The city can become a *refuge from God*, as with the city that Cain built (Gen. 4:17) to flee from God and soften the effect of his punishment. It was his substitute for Eden, an effort to find happiness apart from God. Cities often foster a false sense of security without God. New York City and the delusion under which so many operate—that money and power make us safe—were changed by 9/11, at least temporarily.
- + The city can develop *culture that defies God*, as in Babel: “Come, let us . . . make a name for ourselves” (Gen. 11:4). The very good of competition and collaboration in a city, which encourages great achievement, can also become a stimulus for the idolatry of achievement. Through sin, the city, which drives you to do your very best, becomes an exhausting and destructive place as people use it to make a name for themselves, to “be somebody,” and to gain ultimate significance through achievement. The city tends to draw out the very best and the very worst of human nature. One of the challenges of the city is that many people within it come to believe they don’t need God.
- + The city can become a *place of religious idolatry*, as was Babylon (Rev. 18:3, 24). Materialism has become one of the major forms of idolatry in New York City, but it is more an idolatry of power and control than of

possessions: “Money is power. Money is comfort. Money is security.” Crime and violence at one end of the spectrum and the amassing of great wealth at the other are evidences of the cult associated with money. The ziggurats of the city are the corporate skyscrapers. Beyond those forms of idolatry, cities are also incubators of all sorts of religious cults and false teaching.

IN EVERY EARTHLY CITY ARE TWO KINGDOMS, TWO CITIES VYING FOR CONTROL

Augustine spoke of them as the City of Man and the City of God.⁴ The City of Man is that which exalts itself over and against God. The City of God is that which is characterized by truth, righteousness, and the love of God. That is the dual nature of any earthly city. Although no city this side of the New Jerusalem will be dominated completely by the kingdom of God, we are called to work for the coming of the kingdom here “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

It is not about trying to create utopia. It is rather about trying to bring the influence of the kingdom of God into the city. We are to pray for the city. We are called to live as members of God’s kingdom in the city, driven by our love for God and the love we have experienced from him, and controlled by that second greatest command, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Mark 12:31). Jesus told his disciples (and us as a consequence) to be witnesses for his kingdom (Acts 1:8) and to make disciples (Matt. 28:19); Paul says we must “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). We are to represent Christ in this world, demonstrating his love to virtually every living thing. That is a picture we seldom see fleshed out in Christianity as we know it today.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN? WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE IN PRACTICE?

1. We need to care about the city. We need to be concerned about the city, if for no other reason than our future is likely to be profoundly influenced by what happens there.
2. We need to change our view of the city and not see it as an evil place from which we ought to flee. Negative views are directly linked to disengagement.
3. Understanding the crucial importance of the city, we need to commit ourselves to living in the city. All true ministry is incarnational. We are unlikely to have much effect on the city if we are not living where we can be salt and light.
4. If our intent is to change or have an effect on a city, we have to engage at many different levels.
 - + *We have to proclaim Christ to individuals and communities.* That means church planting, church replanting, and church revitalization. With all of its faults, the church is God’s chosen means of converting and transforming individual lives and the life of any given community. More Christians living out the gospel in the city will bring significant influence and change. We need to help people gain an in-depth understanding of the application of the gospel to their lives.
 - + *We have to “act justly and to love mercy”* (Micah 6:8).
 - + *We have to engage culture.* Cultural forms are the primary way truth is communicated. Christians need to write, make films, and produce music and other forms of artistic expression. To change a city, you have to change how people think and feel.
 - + *We have to help Christians apply their faith in all that they do,* whether business, parenting, education, or anything else.

Copyright © 2009 by Allan Barth, Timothy Keller, and Redeemer City to City.

We encourage you to use and share this material freely—but please don’t charge money for it, change the wording, or remove the copyright information.

4. See Saint Augustine, *City of God* (1470).