

An excerpt of an article "Toward a Theological basis for Urban Ministry"

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Constructing a theology of urban mission

A biblical theology of urban mission is a reflection on the nature and attributes of God, the biblical text being its point of departure. In seeking to understand God and God's ways, it ponders such great themes as God's love, mercy, justice, sovereignty, and power. Were God not the centrifugal force of theology, the God-talk would not be theology, only pretentious chatter. In the context of the city such talk would be sociology, cultural anthropology, urbanology, and economics, but not theology. Again, for a biblical theology of urban mission to be appropriate, it must commence, continue, and be consummated in God.

For theology to be credible it must be dynamic, not static. Theology is seldom a product; it is a process, something done to bring enlightenment and understanding.⁵ It is an activity that is informed and shaped by time and place, making it contextual. Content and context must exist in dynamic interrelationship, each probing, assessing, informing, and shaping the other. Yet to say that theology is contextual is not to say that God is constrained by contexts. On the contrary, God is universal and ultimate.

Of necessity, a theology of urban mission must be thought out and crafted in the urban community. No urban theology far removed from the challenging complexities of urban factors will be tenable or relevant. That is not to say that systematic theology cannot contribute to the formation of a functional urban theology. Yet for it to do so it must be done in the heart of the city, consciously and intentionally connecting all God-talk to the urban context. Only as it speaks to the particularity of the city will its integrity and authority go unchallenged. Grounded in the urban community, such a theology will be more practical and applied than systematic.

In seeking to include urban realities in its formulations and articulations, a biblical theology of urban mission must examine the systems and structures of the city, as well as listen to the stories of its people, especially those living on the margins. In so doing it will not fall victim to either of the two extremes that exist in urban mission today.

On the one hand are those who focus on the big picture, looking at the city from "helicopters" hovering overhead. These individuals view the city as a conglomerate of statistics and unnamed faces. Utilizing the disciplines of cultural anthropology, economics, and sociology, they study the city's population density, its transportation and communication systems, and its religious and socioeconomic distributions.

On the other hand are those who use the ethnographic approach, getting down to the street level and living amongst the city's inhabitants, where they are able to hear the people's stories and observe city life in its everyday flow.

An integration of the helicopter and street-level approach is what is needed in Grafting a tenable urban theology. Such an integration will make for the complete exegesis of the city.

Along the way probing questions will be asked to identify the city's heritage, character, and spirit. Each city has a unique ambiance and flavor, grounded for the most part in its history and often evident in its trends. As such, the urban exegete will analyze the city's history, its place in the country's history and economy, and its past and current labels. The exegete will also examine the city's traumatic experiences (such as earth quakes, economic collapse, ethnic or racial conflicts, etc.) and the political and religious institutions that have dominated its life.⁶

It is in listening to and examining the theological narratives of the city that the urban exegete stands to glean the most useful information for the creation of an urban theology. Germane to the story will be an exploration of the circumstances under which the gospel first entered the city, and the trends that represent the greatest opportunity for the growth of the church. Demographic shifts will be investigated, especially those that have the potential to hurt a mission into the city, or that present seemingly insurmountable barriers to urban mission.

Any approaching crisis that calls for intense prayer will be examined, as well as all subcultures experiencing spiritual darkness or manifesting satanic oppression. And believing that God is already at work in the city, the urban exegete will search for opportunities through which dynamic and struggling congregations may partner to reach the city for Christ.⁷

What is the link between the urban context and the biblical text? Who is most qualified to faithfully exegete both Scripture and the city? The faith community, the church!

The theological task is not an option for the church, but an activity wrapped up in its very being and mission.⁸ Only the church is qualified to bring Scripture to bear on the city with integrity and accuracy. Yet in bringing the two together the church must be careful not to read into Scripture what is not there in an effort to pursue its urban agenda, nor must it view the city in irredeemably bleak terms.

An urban theology that mourns the metropolis instead of celebrating it as a vital component of God's mission agenda will inevitably miss the mark. The faith community will do more than reflect on the biblical text in the context of the city. After reflecting, the faith community will act, then reflect some more. The action/reflection paradigm is creative and dynamic, ever evolving and growing.

Themes of an urban theology

God's love for people. A theology for urban ministry must begin with the nature and character of God love. God created humans out of love. He continues to lavish His love upon them, undeserving though they may be. As the objects of God's love, people His children are the very apple of God's eye, and God's unending love affair with the human family is what sent God's Son, Jesus Christ, to the cross (John 3:16).

Of all God's creation, people, made in His own image, move God most. People cause God to act; people of all shades and colors, of both sexes, of all ages, and of every socioeconomic level. And where are the people of the world found? Masses of them are in the cities of the world.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, 25 percent of the world's population lived in cities; by the turn of the twenty-first, more than half did. Cities are magnets for the world's poor, who stream steadily into them looking for jobs, seeking affordable and accountable health care, and hoping to find an education and to improve themselves.

Rich or poor, people are the object of God's love and concern, and to turn our backs on the city is to treat God's passion for people with benign neglect. Offered freely to all, God's love intentionally seeks out the least deserving, and it delights in seeing the seemingly incorrigible transformed.

A tale of two cities. Using the title of Charles Dickens's famous book as a launching pad, Robert C. Linthicum weaves a biblical theology of the urban church, arguing that the city is at once the dwelling place of God and God's people, and the stronghold of Satan and his hordes of demons.

The abode of personal and structural evil, both of which are rampant and disturbingly real, the city is the battlefield where the great cosmic war between God and Satan is taking place. Yet if sin is pervasive in the city, much more so is God's grace (Rom. 5:20).

Linthicum argues that, contrary to popular belief, the Bible is an urban book that was written in the urban Near East. How then did it come to be viewed otherwise? Linthicum posits that the main theological formulations of the church developed in rural Europe, and that not until the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries did theologians allow city elements to impact how they applied the Bible to urban life.⁹

Vulnerability. When Scripture is read in search of themes for an urban theology, one that will inevitably surface is that of vulnerability. This vulnerability is highly evident in the call and experience of Abraham.

Leaving the land of his origin with its comforts and security, Abraham sojourns in foreign territory, casting off self-preservation so that he may be faithful to God's call. Later, Abraham's descendants are themselves aliens in Egypt, experiencing oppression from their "hosts" and learning firsthand what it means to be displaced.

The embrace of displacement and vulnerability by God's people continues when Israel is exiled and when the first Christians are scattered and persecuted. God requires His people in all these situations to be missional that is, to impact the surrounding culture in ways they would have been unable to do, had they not become pilgrims. God is a sending God. God and God's people do not just call people to them, but go where the people are.

More significantly, Israel's experience shows that to be in Christ is to be a pilgrim who finds belonging, stability, and security not in place but in relationship with and

dependence on God. Seeking to preserve oneself is at variance with the openness to pain that is critical to dealing with the stranger with disinterested benevolence. Because they themselves were aliens, the children of Israel could empathize with the stranger in their midst.

Admonished to welcome the stranger, Israel was to be guided by experiential knowledge, extending to others the grace God had extended to them. Though recipients of a special covenant relationship with God, Israel was to be acutely aware that all they were was due to God's grace. This knowledge was to engender gratitude in the nation.

When Christians accept that we are sojourners in the world and that all we are and have are due to the grace of God, they will stifle the urge to shut out aliens and strangers and to hoard what they possess.

Unity. Offering hospitality to the stranger in the city will contribute to the creation of the spiritual unity for which Christ prayed. This unity reflects the unity of the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is born of humility, and reveals itself in the way the church utilizes the gifts of the Spirit (Eph. 4:1-13)

The implications of this truth for a theology of urban ministry cannot be overstated. Cognizant of our unity in Christ, Christians will admit that we have been gifted to serve those who, though unlike us, need inclusion in the body of Christ.¹⁰

For too long have Christians divided the church and its mission, with mission being understood as an activity the church engages in. Church and mission are inextricably bound together in indivisible interrelation. They must stand together or die apart. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the city, where the purpose of God is not just to transform the stranger but the church as well.

Prone to exhibit an attitude of omniscience, Christians tend to enter the city with a holier-than-thou air, eager to provide all the answers to the city's woes. Such an attitude fails to accept that the city exists for our benefit too. Our engagement with the city must be reciprocal.

Casting off the cloak of omniscience and donning the garment of humility, we must enter and live in the city as learners eager to resonate with its inhabitants, however poor and unlettered they may be. Only then will our perspective expand and we shall come to view the city and its inhabitants as Jesus does.

I recall my first encounter with the mayor of Benton Harbor, Michigan, a city of approximately 9,000 overwhelmingly minority inhabitants. One of the first questions the mayor asked when we were introduced was where I lived. Informed of my residence, which was outside the city limits, she pondered a while before stating that the residents of her city were tired of folk from suburbia descending on them weighted down with all the answers to their plight. What her city needed, the mayor said, were people who demonstrated genuine care by living among them and listening to their stories firsthand.

Christ and the city. A biblical theology of urban ministry would be seriously incomplete without a look at Jesus. Luke tells us that after Jesus confirmed and authenticated His

ministry in the synagogue one Sabbath by quoting Isaiah, He set His face and feet toward the towns and villages, teaching in Capernaum and in Judea (Luke 4:18-44).

Yet it is Matthew and Mark who provide a succinct summary of what may be termed Jesus' urban agenda (Matt. 9:35-11:1; Mark 6:6, 56). Jesus did not flee places bulging with people, but sought them out so He could preach the good news, teach them, and address their felt needs. Incarnating and modeling what the church should be a symbol of the kingdom and its agent in the world Christ went about ministering in peopled contexts and speaking to "urban" issues.

If Jesus came to liberate the "little ones," speak for the voiceless, and welcome the stranger, then the city is the place where He would be found today. His own experience of homelessness and displacement argues the point. Born in a stable, Jesus later stressed that unlike creatures of the wild, He had no permanent home (Matt. 8:20; Luke 9:58). Christ's displacement was consummated after His crucifixion, when, because of poverty, He had to be buried in a tomb owned by another (Matt. 27:57-60).

In Jesus the theology of presence finds supreme expression. Jesus lived amongst those He came to save. Must we not do the same?

From April to June 2002, Don and Ruth James of the North American Division Evangelism Institute lived on the tenth floor of an apartment building on Roosevelt Island in Manhattan to establish relationships with a view to introducing people to Jesus. Theirs was an odyssey in courage, faith, and hope, made so because born and raised in rural America, they had never spent much time in cities and had visited New York City only once before.

The couple succeeded in introducing people to Jesus and studying the Bible with others. They left New York City with one unshakeable conviction that only a long-term commitment to live and work in the city will have a telling impact. And by long-term they mean a minimum of three years.¹¹

Human history will end not in a garden where it started, but in a city, making urbanites of all who have been saved by grace. John saw this city, the New Jerusalem, in vision. It will be a city devoid of pollution, violence, pain, and suffering, and will be inhabited by people of every nationality, gender, ethnicity, language, and class who live in peaceful harmony (Rev. 21:1-8; Isa. 65:17-25).

Old Testament patriarchs and prophets anticipated living in it, abandoning earthly comforts to pursue it in faith and with hope (Heb. 11:8-10). Our theology should cause us, like Abraham, to set our faces to the city and to walk toward it with indefatigable courage