CITY (and Urban Mission and Ministry)

Dictionary Article by Greg Smith

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by David F. Field, Arthur F. Holmes and Oliver O'Donovan David J. Atkinson (Author),
David Atkinson (Editor), David Field (Editor)

Most of us live in the urban present. Already across the world there
are 300 cities of over a million people and in most parts of the world
cities are growing at an incredible rate. For over a century in
Europe, North America and Australasia the majority of people have
lived in towns and cities, and despite negative attitudes and some
flight away from inner city areas, will continue an urban lifestyle
for years to come. Before long the Two Thirds world will also be
predominantly urban.

The Bible speaks of an urban past and and urban future. According to
Stuart Murray there are over 1400 references to cities in the Bible.
These range from the small fortified settlements of the promised land
( ) to the megalopolises of Nineveh (Jonah   ) and Rome (Acts   ).
The Bible is a surprisingly urban book, and the first churches
flourished in urban settings such as Corinth, Ephesus, Phillippi and
Antioch. Although ancient cities differ from modern ones in size,
structure, architecture, transport systems and government, which makes
hermeneutics difficult, there are a number of underlying Biblical
principles which should shape our attitudes to the cities in which we
live.

Some Christian writers such as Elul and the majority of western
evangelicals have taken a pessimistic view of cities, emphasising the
sin and depravity which they see as gathering there. For them hope
resides mainly in the salvation of individuals out of the evil city.
Other modern radicals such as Cox have held an essentially optimistic
view of the urban. For them the city offers freedom, choice and the
chance to exercise human responsibility in a secular setting. More
recent writings by radical evangelicals such as Lim and Murray have
present a more balanced view of the city as a place where good and
evil conflict, but where God's purposes for personal and social
transformation can be worked out usually by the children of the
Kingdom, and often despite them.

According to Ray Bakke cities in the Bible are portrayed as having a
(usually female) personality. Jerusalem (eventually a bride) has a
sister in Sodom (   ) and a rival in the prostitute Babylon / Rome
(Rev.   ). Throughout Scripture Babylon is the symbol of evil city
system, and of an unjust and oppressive empire, and from which in
certain circumstances we are called to flee. In contrast Jerusalem
(the foundation of SHALOM - peace), although repeatedly and tragically

falling, and even murdering the prophets, becomes the symbol of what is possible for a city if redeemed. The vision of (Is 61 taken up in Rev 21) is a model on which to build our urban dreams.

Charismatic urban theology (e.g. Bos & Mclung) has developed the Biblical ideas of city personalities alongside a theology of angels, powers, principalities and ruling spirits. Such writers see an intimate connection between geographical areas, historical events and spiritual oppression and offer strategies of spirtual warfare to help bring in the Kingdom of God in urban areas.

There are many events recorded in scripture which show that God is merciful to cities and their people, far more than they deserve. God would have spared Sodom if only ten righteous people had lived there, he sent Jonah to Nineveh by special delivery to preach repentance, and much to the prophets chagrin was merciful not only to adults who repented but to infants and cattle as well. In the N.T. as many cities from Jerusalem to Rome were blessed, and eventually changed for the better by the preaching of the Gospel.

To some extent the welfare of any city is connected with the willingness of God's people to live there and follow the pattern of incarnation and service which Jesus showed. In one sense Christians should be pilgrims like Abraham and have no abiding city, but stress their citizenship of heaven. Yet like the exiles in Babylon (exemplified in the lives of Daniel and his colleagues) they are called to settle down and be concerned for the welfare (SHALOM) of their cities. This commitment involves a verbal witness to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, but also a life of full involvement in society, compassionate service, social action and political passion for justice and truth.

In the modern world cities are more than a place plus people. In order to respond intelligently we need to understand the variety of functions the fulfill. Some cities are mostly industrial (e.g. Sheffield), some financial and cultural (e.g. New York), some governmental centres (Canberra), and others combine many functions (e.g. London). There are still some cities which have a religious function and strong symbolic value (e.g. Rome, Jerusalem, Varanasi). However most modern cities in practice operate on secular assumptions and increasingly international migration has added ethnic plurality to the pluralism of values and lifestyles which has long been a feature of large cities.

As a result there are a series of ethical issues which have a distinctive urban flavour. Wealth, poverty and economic justice are high on the God's agenda, whether we look at the favellas of Sao Paolo, the obscene wealth of Malabar Hill in Bombay or the juxtaposition of the City of London with the deprived East End. Money is usually associated with power and the powerlessness of many urban people has rightly led many urban Christian leaders to campaign

alongside the poor for basic human rights and an end to oppression.
Often struggles will centre around issues of land and housing, even in
a wealthy city like London in 1991 where thousands sleep on the
streets or in hostels and bed and breakfast hotels.

In most large cities neighbourliness and a sense of community is
notable by its absence. The church is therefore called to neighbour
love and community building. Small base community groups can be very
effective in this context. In multiethnic cities there is a special
challenge to break down barriers in the church, to express the gospel
in more than one culture, and to struggle for racial justice alongside
minority groups.

The urban church as a result of its social setting and Biblical
faithfulness should expect to become:

diverse yet seeking unity
evangelising and church planting (even though small)
prophetic and political
serving and suffering
standing for justice alongside the poor
compassionate and healing
praying and praising.