CITY SAINTS
by Fletcher L. Tink

As October withers like spent leaves off a tree, the Christian calendar shoots forth two curious blossoms—Reformation Sunday and All Saints’ Day. Modern cities need reformers and saints and everything between. A scan of biblical history introduces us to an eclectic array of individuals who built, evangelized, and transformed cities.

Cain, a murderer, is given a second chance and erects the first recorded city, Enoch, named for his son.

Joseph, a dreamer and economist for Egypt, creates seven-year plans to deal with deficits and surpluses and relocates urban populations for improved economic benefit.

David, a former husbandry specialist promoted to king, designs a holy city where the presence of God and the Shepherd of His people could be found.

Esther, an exiled beauty, joins the harem of her enemy Xerxes under duress and then uses her privileged state to leverage salvation for an oppressed urban minority.

Nehemiah, a Persian layman, receives a government grant and leave of absence to reconstruct the demolished city of Jerusalem. As part of his plan, he announces a “tithe” of people, not just of money, to offer their services and lives to rebuild the city.

Daniel, a politician and adviser in Babylon, a man of impeccable integrity, outlasts several heads of state to bring just order to oppressive urban-based government.

Jonah, a reluctant prophet whom God uses despite his hostility to the mission, brings the message of salvation to Ninevah. The city-wide campaign results in revival with a 100% conversion rate. Jonah, unfortunately, lapses into depression when he discovers that Ninevah, archenemy of Israel, can be both loved and accepted by God.

Jeremiah, a city saint, acts out God’s message for the city in symbolic and, at times, bizarre ways, offering warning in good times and hope in bad.

Jesus, the Savior, weeps over the city, ministers principally in the city, and dies just outside the city gate.

Barnabas, a missionary strategist, uses First Church of Antioch to launch urban mission forays into other urban locales.

Paul, a missionary first for Jewish faith and then for Christian, tromps across the urban world to plant and nourish churches through a wide variety of evangelistic techniques, including Socratic dialogue, rabbinical teaching, signs and wonders, personal conversations, and letters. The high point of his calling is his witness in Rome, the center of the empire, where first in chains and then in martyrdom he effectively attacks Satan in the jugular.

And God prepares the New Jerusalem, a city gift-wrapped for those who are ready to receive it as it descends from the clouds.

The pantheon of impassioned urban individuals who create and transform cities is yet being completed. Francesco Bernadone (1181-1226), a troubled, battle-weary soldier, returns to his hometown on the slopes of Mt. Subasio in green Umbria, Italy. He is impressed by its numerous family tragedies, impoverished houses, hunger, crime and violence . . . where the moral order could not fail to go to pieces.” Francesco undergoes a spiritual conversion, is disinherited by his father, repudiates all symbols of materialism, communes with nature, and finds soul brothers and sisters willing to live in huts. He inadvertently starts a worldwide movement that continues to prod us moderns into concern for the poor, respect for nature, a lifestyle of pacifism, and a spirit of ecumenicity. To walk today around Assisi, a city forever linked with Francesco’s name—St. Francis—is to feel not only his impact but also something of the exquisite presence of God.
John Calvin (1509-1564), a theologian and Church reformer, is summoned by citizens of Geneva, Switzerland, to bring order to their besieged and violent city. From 1541 until his death, Calvin materializes his theology into an ideal Protestant society, writing its constitution, developing its school system, building hospitals and sewer systems, offering special care for the poor, and introducing new industries. Today Geneva is known as a center for international diplomacy, the home of the World Health Organization, and the heart of the Protestant Reformation.

William Penn (1644-1718), a victim of religious persecution and internment in England, desires to found a colony where religious freedom is guaranteed. King Charles II grants him land between the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers on the eastern coast of the New World, and in 1681 Penn surveys it, lays it out, and names it Philadelphia, meaning city of brotherly love. It is Penn who develops the concept of a penitentiary, a place to rehabilitate prisoners on the basis of penitence. Today, his statue stands tall on the peak of city hall.

John Wesley (1703-91), a missionary failure, comes to the New World to convert the native peoples but laments that he himself needs conversion. His three-year pastoral assignment in sultry Savannah, Georgia, turns disastrous due to conniving women, misguided role expectations, and political intrigue. He returns to England, dejected but receptive to the subsequent Aldersgate experience in London. It rejuvenates his purposes and sets in motion the beginnings of the Wesleyan revival. Savannah is most forgiving, and Reynolds Square now hosts a statue of Wesley, Christ Church notes his services as rector, and Wesley Monumental United Methodist Church honors its faithful son.

Antonio Francisco Lisboa (1730-1814), bastard child of master and slave in colonial Brazil, is a prolific and renowned sculptor. He suffers a debilitating bout of leprosy, which leaves him so physically damaged that he is nicknamed Aleijadinho, Little Cripple. Shortly thereafter, he experiences a spiritual conversion and pledges to spend the rest of his life creating sculptures to praise God. Today, thousands of tourists visit the old colonial cities of Congonhas and Ouro Preto to see the dozens of soapstone statues fashioned by this crippled man to honor stories and personalities of Scripture. He is in good company; the artisans and craftsmen assigned to adorn the tabernacle are the first mentioned in Scripture to receive the infilling of the Holy Spirit (Exodus 31:1-2).

Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu (1910-1997), youngest child of an Albanian builder in Skopje, Macedonia, joins a Catholic order at age 18. She serves first in Ireland and then in India. When a siege of tuberculosis changes her life, she steps out of her traditional compliant role and in 1952 founds the Missionary of Charity Order. We know her as Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Linked to her name, a city that previously connoted poverty and desperation is now seen as a center of practical compassion. Mother Teresa has shown us that great things are done one by one and that we are called to be “little pencils” in the hand of God. He does the thinking. He does the writing. The pencil has nothing to do with it; it is only allowed to be used.

Like the author of Hebrews 11:32, I write, “What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about” Josephine Butler, a Victorian who fought state regulation of prostitution and confronted the root issues of poverty and women’s civil rights; Octavia Hill, the first social worker; Florence Nightingale, who shattered precedence by establishing the first nursing school and pioneered statistical analysis, saving lives throughout the world; and James Rouse, a contemporary urban developer who on Christian philosophical principles reconstructed Baltimore’s harbor, the Boston Quincy market, and Seattle’s downtown. All these are lives of practical Christian faith.

The writer of Hebrews identifies their faith. “They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one,” he says. “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:16). Do we share similar tenacious faith in creating and recreating our cities as we imagine the heavenly city to be? All it takes is one city saint.

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