Towards a Theology for the City - Prepared by Fletcher Tink

An adaptation from the Lausanne Committee Urban Report compiled by Ray Bakke

I. References to the “City” in Scripture

A. In the Old Testament, the common Hebrew word is “ir” (a city of busy concourse) and is translated as “city” 1071 times and 7 times as “town”
B. In the New Testament, the Greek term “polis” is used (generally referring to a city enclosed with walls for protection and security. It is mentioned 159 times.
C. There are other terms used such as “ar” in Hebrew (4 times); “quiryah” and its variations (40 times) and “shaar” (3 times).
D. The Bible, then, is filled with many references to cities that can inform us 1) because of God’s interactions with the cities and 2) because of the behavior of people in cities, both to destroy and to heal.

II. Images of the City Implied within Scripture (Roger Greenway)

A. The City as it might have been if sin hadn’t entered into the world.
B. The City that will be: Intimations of it in Is. 65:17-65; Zech. 8; Rev. 21:1-8; 22:1-5
C. There are other terms used such as “ar” in Hebrew (4 times); “quiryah” and its variations (40 times) and “shaar” (3 times).
D. The “Common Grace” cities described within Scripture.

III. “Common Grace” Cities Mentioned in Scripture

A. 119 cities are mentioned throughout Scripture
B. First cities mentioned are those of Cain (Enoch) and Lamech. Enoch is a expression of protection, meaning and God’s grace despite Cain’s sin
C. Babel: Gen. 11
   1. God sees the behavior of cities
   2. Cities have corporate personalities and sins
   3. Cities tend to concentrate God-equivalent power and fame
   4. Babel’s arrogance results in the breakdown of communication, social stratification and diffusion. This is reversed on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem through the agency of the baptism of the Holy Spirit.
D. Sodom: Gen. 18, 19; Ez. 16:48ff
   1. Abraham gives us an example of intercession for the city
   2. God can distinguish between the presence of righteous and unrighteous people in the city.
   3. The presence of godly people in the city is linked to its preservation. Lot’s family, if they had been righteous, constituted enough family members to have saved the city.
   4. The primary evil of Sodom was both personal (sexual) and systemic arrogance and failure to care for the urban poor (Ez. 16:48-50).
E. Jericho: Josh. 3-6
   1. Cities can be disarmed by obedience strategies and individuals.
   2. Warfare against evil is not necessarily fought with military weaponry, but often with God’s strange interventions based on human obedience.
3. God provides special protection even for the family of the prostitute Rahab based on her unusual confidence in God even in the midst of the collapse of the city around her.

F. Cities of Refuge: Num. 35:6-33; Josh. 20

1. Six cities scattered throughout Israel, available as sanctuaries of grace, to protect those who unwittingly had shed blood.
2. These cities not only show the cost of shed blood, which splits families and requires separation, but also provides for new starts and forgiveness (when the priest die).
3. These cities foreshadow “Christ as our heavenly priest” where the priests die to free the accused from blame.
4. These cities were to be a haven not just for Jews, but for aliens.

G. Ninevah: cf. Jonah and Nahum (present day Iraq)

1. God cares for pagan cities and works even through unwilling servants to save them.
2. The city is a collective entity apart from specific individuals. No Ninevites are named specifically in the story.
3. God cares for Israel’s enemies and oppressors, even the worst, just as much as he cares for “our” cities.
4. God accepts Ninevah’s repentance even in the shallowness of the message, and Jonah’s own perverse motives.
5. Jonah’s “in and out” evangelism deprived the Ninevites of ongoing discipleship or incarnational ministry. Perhaps this deficiency contributed to Ninevah’s demise 150 years later (Nahum)

H. Babylon: cf. Jeremiah and Daniel (modern-day Iran)

1. God uses even pagan cities for judgment on His own wayward
2. Exiles are to seek first the shalom of the city because personal prosperity is a direct byproduct of community prosperity (Jer. 29:7)
3. Great testimony comes out of the life of pagan cities when God’s own people express integrity at the smallest and highest levels, i.e. Daniel and the three Hebrew young men.
4. Out of cultural distress, come new forms of improvisation, For example, diasporic Judaism created new, written and institutional forms, (the prophetic literature and the synagogue) of their faith that facilitated the rapid spread of Christianity many years later.

I. Jerusalem: many texts

1. An eleven hundred year record of God’s love and grace towards this city, even in the midst of religious abuse and social failure.
2. This record is accompanied by the history of faithful individuals and ministries found in both Testaments.
3. Jeremiah is willing to invest, by buying property in Jerusalem, in its worst days as a public statement of hope and redemption. (Jer. 32)
4. Jesus weeps with compassion and tenderness over the city even while knowing the immanence of its destruction.
5. The advent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem reverses the Babel breakdown in communication.
6. The city of Jerusalem was intended to be a prototype of the Kingdom of God, the “Holy City”, a city set on a hill, to be a witness of God’s governance, to all nations. Its character and failure
serve as a vivid, detailed case study for informing modern Christian communities.

J. Rome: many texts; Epistle to the Romans

1. Rome represents the personification of evil, described as the “beast” of Revelation.
2. Yet, Rome offers its own “grace” by providing citizenship to Paul to facilitate his missionary endeavor, and to appeal his conviction.
3. Rome becomes the focal point for the spread of Christianity to the world.
4. The Church in Rome is a wonderful example of varieties of people all woven into the fabric of the congregation.


1. This was the city were the worshippers were first known as “Christians”.
2. The Church at Antioch serves as a prototype of a truly healthy New Testament Church, implying the following characteristics: a society of the caring, molded together a classless society; was race inclusive; tolerated strong people with differing opinions; was redemptive; trained its leaders; translated opposition into victory; listened to God, etc. (See E. Stanley Jones, The Reconstruction of the Church----On What Pattern?)

L. Corinth: see the Epistles and Acts 18

1. Was the center of licentiousness and religious pluralism
2. Illustrates Paul’s contextual ministry among expatriate Jews, for Example, Priscilla and Aquila.
3. Shows how a city’s moral and ethical issues spill over into a local Church.
4. Shows practically how Paul offered pastoral responses to these many problems.

M. New Jerusalem: Rev. 3; 21

1. A vision of what the City ought to look like
2. It reminds us that this City is a gift from God, not the results of our own efforts, an “eschatological city” prepared for the saints.
3. It is not human-made, but “comes down from heaven.”
4. It is large enough for all, and provides gates from all directions.
5. It combines rural, pastoral, urban themes in a kaleidoscope of images
6. The gates are made of “pearl”, the image of irritant and suffering.
7. History may begin in a garden but inevitably culminates in a City.

IV. Major Missionaries and Strategists to the City

A. Lay Strategists:

1. Joseph, economist for the Egyptians, who creates two 7-year plans for deficits, one for surpluses; managed and relocated populations. saving both his adopted nation, those around and even his own family. (Gen. 37-50)
2. Esther, exiled beauty who, under duress, was conscripted into enemy Xerxes harem. However, she uses her subtle political leverage to save her people. Recognized her divine sense of purpose, even though “God” language was not used.
3. Nehemiah, Persian layman who received government grant and leave of absence to recreate
the planned city of Jerusalem Community developer. Called for a tithe of the people to repopulate Jerusalem (Neh. 11:1). He was the ultimate pragmatist (“semi-saint” according to Yancey), who entered into unholy coalitions to accomplish necessary goals (in contrast to “super-saint” Ezra).

4. Daniel, the Babylonian politician who outlasted several heads of state, through divine intervention and personal integrity, thereby bringing just order to oppressive urban-based government.

B. Prophetic Strategists

1. Jonah, called to witness God’s judgment on Ninevah. Despite his disobedience, he is miraculously preserved to convey the Word of God to a receptive people. Is more a story of God’s missionary heart than Jonah’s.

2. Jeremiah, city saint, acts out prophetic message in violent and strange metaphoric (story) forms, suggesting that defeat and exile are immanent, but there is even hope in the context of alien cities.

3. Jesus weeps over the city and ministers principally in the city, dying just outside of the City gate.

4. Barnabas was a major strategist at the Church at Antioch and from there, he and Paul initiated their missionary ventures. Here, he modeled what a “Christian” was.

5. Paul, great urban missionary, moves around the urban world, planting and encouraging churches through a wide variety of practical urban missiological techniques.