

The Importance of the City

Tim Keller, October 1995

A BIBLICAL VIEW OF CITIES

A. GOD BUILDS CITIES

Why is the city so important to the Christian Church?

Hebrews 11:10 - "For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

God began history in a Garden, but is ending it in a city (Rev. 21). God tells Adam to multiply and develop a civilization that will glorify him (Gen. 1:27-28). Adam fails, and God through Christ the second Adam does get a civilization that glorifies him, but Hebrews and Revelation 21 show us that this world he desires is urban. The wife of the Lamb is a beautiful city, shining with the glory of God (Rev. 21: 10-11). When we look at the New Jerusalem, we discover that in the midst of the city are a crystal river and the Tree of Life, bearing fruit and leaves that heal the nations of the effects of the divine covenant curse. This city is the Garden of Eden, remade. The City is the fulfillment of the purposes of the Eden of God.

Is this "only" metaphorical? God is called a Father who is building a spiritual family. That means that, though the earthly family is an institution corrupted by sin, we are to seek to redeem and rebuild human families. So God is a city builder who is building a spiritual city. That means that, though the earthly city is an institution corrupted by sin, we are to seek to redeem and rebuild human cities. As we are to redeem human families by spreading within them the family of God, so we are to redeem human cities by spreading within them the city of God. We know that the power of a marriage is such that, as your marriage goes, so goes your life. So the power of cities are such that, as the city goes, so goes society.

B. WHY GOD BUILDS CITIES

1. *A place of shelter for the weak and different.*

(a) *Under God:* The city was invented as a place of refuge from criminals, animals and marauders. By its nature, the city is a place where minorities can cluster for support in an alien land, where refugees can find shelter and where the poor can better eke out an existence. The city is always a more merciful place for minorities of all kinds. The dominant majorities often dislike cities, but the weak and powerless need them. They cannot survive in the suburbs and small towns. Thus cities are places of diversity, unlike villages. They reflect the Future City where there will be people of "every tongue, tribe, people and nation".

(b) *Under sin:* The city becomes a refuge from God, where people with deviant lifestyles can run and hide because of the natural tolerance the city breeds toward those who are different. Also, under sin, the diversity breeds anger, tension and violence between the different groups.

2. *A cultural and human development centre.*

3. *Under God:* The city stimulates and focuses the gifts, capacities and talents of people, the deep potentialities in the human heart. It does so by bringing you into

contact with: (1) people unlike you – very diverse and providing different perspectives, and with (2) people like you who are just as good or better at what you do. The concentration of human talent, both by competition and cooperation, produces greater works of art, science, technology and culture. The city moves you to reach down and press toward excellence.

4. *Under sin:* The city is exhausting, leading to burnout. Also, now the city leads human beings into an ambition to “make a name for themselves” (Gen. 11:4). Selfishness, pride and arrogance are magnified in the city. Since God invented it as a “cultural mine”, the city now brings out whatever is in the human heart, the very best and worst of humanity.

C. *A place of spiritual searching and temple building.*

1. *Under God:* The city is the place where God dwells in the centre – in the earthly city of Jerusalem, the temple stands as the central integrating point of the city’s architecture and as apex of its art, science and technology. Even now, the city’s intensity makes people religious seekers.
2. *Under sin:* As in ancient times when the city was built around “ziggurats”, landing pads for the god of the city, so today are people drawn into skyscraper temples worshipping the self and money. Cities are hotbeds of religious cults, idols and false gods. Since cities breed spiritual seeking, when Christians abandon the cities, the seekers fall into the hands of idols and heresies.

Summary: In every earthly city, there are two “cities” vying for control. They are the City of Man and the City of God (see Augustine’s *City of God*). Though the fight between these two kingdoms happens everywhere in the world, earthly cities are the flashpoints on the battle lines, the places where the fighting is most intense, and where victories are the most strategic. Because of the power of the city, it is the chief target for the forces of darkness, because that which wins the city sets the course of human life and society and culture. Therefore, in general, the city is the most crucial place to minister.

D. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

1. *Who we can only reach in the city.* If the Christian church wants to really change the country and culture, it must go into the cities themselves, not just into the suburbs or even the exurbs. Three kinds of persons live there who exert a tremendous influence on our society, and we cannot reach them in the suburbs. They are: (1) the “elites” who control the culture and who are becoming increasingly secularized; (2) the masses of new immigrants who move out into the mainstream society over the next 30 years; and (3) the poor, whose dilemmas are deepening rapidly and affecting the whole country.
2. *Why we can best reach them in the city.* Wayne Meeks of Yale, in *The First Urban Christians*, points out that Paul’s missionary work was urban-centred. He went to population centres and ignored small towns and the countryside. Christianity spread better in the urban Roman Empire than in the countryside. Why? (1) People in the city are less conservative, more open to new ideas; (2) Christian evangelists found that in the city the gospel could spread faster into the influence centres – law, politics, arts, etc. – and into diverse national groups. By the year 300AD, over half of the urban populations of the Empire were Christian while the countryside was pagan (the word *paganus* means country-man!). The early church was urban. There is no intrinsic reason for urban people to be less religious, only less traditional.