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**Evangelical
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These issues present not a scenario for despair but simply the dimensions of the challenge we face. Europe survived the Black Death of the fourteenth century, though in many places half the population died. Floods, earthquakes, disease, and wars have threatened major parts of the globe in the past and will do so again. Today's issues, however, are unprecedented in their scope and reach, and in the way they interact and touch the very fabric of life for all earth's peoples.

From a Christian standpoint, these issues caution us against triumphalism or an easy optimism. Human sin is still with us, not only in each individual and group, but cumulatively, clogging the structures of our social and environmental systems. As we move into [p. 137](#) the twenty-first century, the world is one family at war with itself and threatening to poison or explode its own home.

CONCLUSION

Where does all this leave the church? First of all, these and related trends will require much more study and analysis. Some are clear and empirically validated; others are more questionable and may clash with significant countertrends. But all represent areas of ferment or challenge for the church.

In our book we have reviewed these trends in light of John Naisbitt's *Megatrends* and have suggested possible long-range implications. In the conclusion we suggest four possible 'alternative futures' for the church and society: friendly fascism, Armageddon, nuclear terrorism, and world revival. We stress that any of these scenarios is possible, in whole or in part, or possibly in combination or sequence. The future rests on the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of the church and, finally, on God's sovereign activity. We hope that some attention to actual and potential trends will aid Christians in sorting out the challenges they face and responding faithfully of the good news of the kingdom.

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The City in the Bible

David S. Lim

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In this comprehensive and well-documented piece of research, Dr. David Lira expounds a (badly needed) biblical theology of the City, which he himself sub-titles as 'Eschatological Hope in Historical Realism'. Starting with a definition of the city in the light of biblical data he proceeds to present a theological paradigm built around five biblical motifs on urbanization: history, Babylon, Jerusalem, New Jerusalem and the church. His main thesis: 'The scriptures reveal that God desires to fully redeem and ultimately perfect the city, and that this process is happening in world history.' The inclusion of a long section on the role of the church in this whole process of urbanization throws fresh light on current missiological

debates not only for the Asian churches but for the church universal This is a paper presented at the recent ATA Theological Consultation in October/November 1987 at Singapore.

Editor

The Bible starts with a perfect garden and ends with a perfect city.

This paper seeks to expound a biblical theology of the city, which may be subtitled 'Eschatological Hope in Historical Realism'. It starts with a definition of 'city' in relation to biblical data, and proceeds to present a theological paradigm built around five motifs about urbanization. It advances the thesis that the Scriptures reveal that God desires to fully redeem and ultimately perfect the city,¹ and that this process is happening in world history. Thus it includes a long section on the role of the church in light of this interpretation of biblical revelation.

DEFINITION OF 'CITY'

In the Scriptures, the term 'city' appears about 1,600 times in the Old Testament and 160 times in the New, without counting the instances in which the cities' proper names are used. Although the plain factual description or account of the cities occur in historical narratives, yet it **P. 139** seems clear that these occurrences can be made to fit into a framework from which a 'biblical theology' of cities can be presented.

This article views the city from three perspectives: as a social system or lifestyle, as a cultural centre, and as a religious centre.

City as Social System

The city may be seen as a social order because it offers its residents not just a common territory, but also a total way of life. It is a community that consists of a population more dense than the village; thus it evolves a lifestyle that contrasts with the village and the wilderness.² Near eastern cities seem to have arisen *circa* 3500 BC as fortified strongholds (in contrast to unwallled villages; cf. [Num. 13:29](#)); they gave protection against enemies and potential attackers.³ Upon settling in Canaan, the tribal Hebrews had difficulty overcoming and occupying the cities there ([Judg. 1:27ff](#); [3:1-5](#)), but they were also able to build large cities ([Num. 13:28](#); [Dt. 3:5](#); [Josh. 6:5](#); [Neh. 3:1-3](#), [11](#), [25](#)), each with strong towers and gates ([Judg. 9:51](#); [2 Sam. 18:33](#), etc.). Until New Testament times, 'city residents are known to be those who earn their living through occupations not directly related to farming, fishing, herding or mining'.⁴

Thus, it can be seen that urbanization was happening in biblical times; and this centripetal pull of humanity being gathered into cities and developing urban lifestyle seems to be taken as a historical phenomenon which does not necessarily conflict with

¹ This avoids the extreme views of optimism (e.g. H. Cox, *The Secular City*) or of pessimism (e.g. J. Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*) on the city. For a brief history of Christian thought concerning the city, cf. H. M. Conn, 'The Kingdom of God and the City of Man: A History of the City/Church Dialogue'. *Disciplining the City*, ed. R. Greenway (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 9-59. For a survey of modern Christian views on the city, cf. H. M. Conn, 'Christ and the City: Biblical Themes for Building Urban Theology Models', *ibid.*, 222-286.

² Cf. R. F. Hock, 'Economics in New Testament Times', *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 239. Though ancient (and biblical) cities may differ in complexity of forms, they are similarly 'mothers of [rural] towns' (cf. [Ezek. 16](#)). Also cf. R. Bakke, 'A Biblical Theology for Urban Ministry', *Metro-Ministry*, ed. D. Frenchak & S. Keyes (Elgin, Illinois: David Cook Publ., 1979), 18.

³ Cf. H. Bietenhard, '*polis*', *NIDNTT, II* (Zondervan, 1976), 802.

⁴ Hock, 239.

the apparently centrifugal mandate of 'Fill the earth and subdue it' ([Gen. 1:28](#)) in the Bible.⁵

From a social scientific viewpoint, urbanization has been found to have great impact on people: as people congregate in cities, 'what [p. 140](#) comes into being is a new order of relationships among persons, radically different from what is obtained in rural areas and heavily imposed on newcomers'; it is an impersonal process, not a lifestyle chosen by individuals, but 'the collective condition of all those who live in the city'.⁶ The existence of this 'urban complex' does not mean that every city is composed of one or a few people-groups, but that all cities reveal a culture that is distinctly urban. In this sense, as large communities with a particular type of lifestyle, nation-states may be viewed as bigger versions of city-states, and empires as those of nation-states.

City as Cultural Centre

Cities serve as centres of human culture (and civilizations). Cultures may be viewed as the creative production of human work and as the projection of human personhood created in the image of the creating God. As products of human creative powers, cultures and cities are significant, for they fit into the original purposes of God given in his cultural mandate ([Gen. 1:26-28; 2:15](#)). As points of great concentrations of culture, cities may thus be considered the symbols or personifications of human achievements.

The city is the place where human migratory and wandering existence ends: people become food-producers (not just food-gatherers) as they learn how to control and use nature (hence, the rise of science and technology),⁷ build 'permanent' houses, and establish social structures that facilitate their community life while minimizing social conflicts. The city becomes an area's mercantile centre where the accumulation and distribution of wealth occur;⁸ it also serves as the seat of power (even military and colonial power) over weaker and less developed human settlements, as well as the focus of civilization where culture (including arts, sciences, etc.) is developed. Thus the [p. 141](#) king and those in authority (e.g. priests and governors) are used as symbolical representatives of the city.⁹

⁵ Humanity may have been unintentionally fulfilling the 'fill the earth' aspect of the cultural mandate, by spreading throughout the globe, though not as evenly as God may have originally intended. Before the industrial revolution, people resorted to cities only for specific requirements; thus urbanization proceeded at slow rates and was relatively non-disruptive and even sometimes reversed, but now it has been accelerating under the centripetal force akin to a mass movement; cf. B. Tonna, *Gospel for the Cities* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1978), 5, 10.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 6, which also shows that this 'urban complex' is 'formed ... by the regularity that patterns the normal interaction among residents and imposes on each one of them a particular way of reacting to reality and of behaving in daily life'. Louis Wirth notes, 'When different kinds of people live in densely populated areas in large numbers, the impact on personality and lifestyles are predictable', e.g., family life becomes nuclear (for easier mobility).

⁷ Towns and villages become annexes of the city, for the need to get equipments and comforts distributed from the city. Though the city seems to eliminate natural necessities (e.g. climatic changes), it thrives by night shifts, tight working schedules and the presence of cheap labour.

⁸ In NT times, the city's big households belonged to the aristocracy who owned lands in the outskirts; cf. Hock, 240f.

⁹ On the 'powers' as primarily human, cf. G. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1983), 87-92; and W. Wink, *Naming the Powers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) and *Unmasking the Powers* (Fortress, 1986).

City as Religious Centre

Archaeological evidences also point to the religious nature of the rise of cities. Many, if not all, ancient cities were walled precincts with a temple area devoted to a main city-god and other deities. Some had fortress-temples (e.g. [Gen. 32:30–32](#); [Ex. 14:2](#); [Jdg. 8:8f, 17](#)) or temple-towers (i.e. ziggurats); and some became sacred sites themselves (e.g. Bethel, Shiloh, Thebes, Mecca).

This author concurs with those who believe that city-building has been primarily a religious enterprise. The city developed, not just to benefit its settlers, but also (even mainly) to benefit its divinity; hence religion plays a significant role in the city.¹⁰ This metaphysical dimension of the city reveals the spiritual motivation that underlies the construction of human civilizations.

There are five major motifs which concern the city in the Bible: history, Babylon, Jerusalem, the New Jerusalem and the Church.

HISTORY: GOD INTENDS URBANIZATION

The city is the key to biblical visions of humanity's final destiny, and hence the meaning of human history. Urbanization is, therefore, the apparent consequence of obedience to God's cultural mandate. Even after the Fall, the works of humans created in God's image are spared from destruction. In [Genesis 4](#), animal husbandry, entertainment and technology are developed without divine condemnation; in fact, God's concern for human welfare is repeated to Noah ([Gen. 9:1–7](#)).

In salvation history, the cities of Egypt and Gerar offered tribute to Abraham ([12:16](#); [20:14](#), cf. [23:6](#)); cities sprung from the wells dug by Isaac ([26:18–33](#)); Bethel arose from the spot where Jacob saw a vision ([28:16–19](#)); and Joseph became an empire-manager to save Israel ([41:57](#); [42:6](#); [47:6](#)). Israel developed its civilization, and when [p. 142](#) brought into exile, many (e.g. Daniel, Esther, Nehemiah) served in the courts of pagan kings. Above all, through the incarnation, God affirmed his deep concern to redeem the world and humanity: that is, to fill the incompleteness of human development in history.

Urbanization includes human liberation from fate and 'powers and principalities' which dominate rural or primitive life;¹¹ the Bible envisions humans ruling (not *being determined by*) the world and its dehumanizing forces, including nature's 'groanings'. Yet, though called to 'defatalize' these powers, humanity has consistently tended to misuse and abuse the city's freedom; hence the need for God's redeeming work.

Nevertheless, even in the most pessimistic strand of biblical eschatology (the apocalyptic view), where history is seen as the arena of God's conflict with Satanic forces, God is also at work in history and will receive every human accomplishment in history into glory ([Rev. 21:24–26](#)). The eschatological city accepts the gifts of different cultures; e.g. laden camels from Midian, Ephah and Sheba, cargo-laden ships from Tarshish, and precious wood from Lebanon; it receives the 'wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession', and there is no more oppression and destruction (cf. [Isa. 60](#)).

Thus the Bible reveals that God takes human efforts focused in urbanization seriously, and he will judge all peoples (and individuals) on what they have done in light of the

¹⁰ E. g., L. Mumford, *The City in History*; and P. BerBer, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1967), 3. The latter avers, 'Every human society is an enterprise of world-building. Religion occupies a distinctive place in this enterprise.' Thus, rather than call cities 'secular', they may better be called 'idolatrous', living without regard for God, or really worshipping Mammon.

¹¹ cf. Cox, 110–111.

cultural mandate. In the end, he will not abolish or destroy the works of humankind; instead he will gather up their achievements, so that nothing that has been made by human creativity (except sin) will be discarded.

BABYLON: HUMANITY MISUSES URBANIZATION

However, the technology-making and city-building project is shown to be not just a neutral development: it grows out of the line of Cain. It is highlighted in the construction of the tower of Babel, and symbolized in the 'great image' of Nebuchadnezzar's dream, of Babylon and her daughter-empires ([Dan. 2](#)). In the New Testament, Babylon becomes the code name for Rome ([Rev. 14:8](#); [17:1–19:3](#)), the embodiment of the city's evil.

As a social system, Babylon is marked by individualism and its accompanying evils. From the beginning is revealed its propensity to [p. 143](#) break up community ([Gen. 4:1–14](#)), especially the family (vv. [19](#), [23f](#)). Though Cain was condemned to wander, yet he defied the curse by taking roots in the city to establish his own Eden; though he found the self-sustaining security of his city,¹² it seems clear that he lived a very lonely life. In the [Genesis 11](#) account, this human search for communal security proved to be illusive: a common project actually resulted in the confusion and isolation of one from the others. The city seems to have an inherent basic weakness: the inability to maintain and facilitate communication among its inhabitants.¹³ In its goal of centralizing its social organization and services, families and local neighbourhoods become meaningless and marginal, while its bureau-cracy becomes inefficient and expensive to maintain. Thus most city residents feel helpless, meaningless and dehumanized.

As a cultural centre, Babylon is controlled by 'powers and principalities' who tend to be corrupt, oppressive and self-centred, thus hindering the full development of the human potentials as God purposed. Babylon's oppressive nature is seen in its cruelty in taking nations into captivity and in destroying cities and their populations (cf. Habakkuk). Israel experienced such oppression in Pharaoh's Egypt, where Hebrews built store-cities as slaves ([Exod. 1:9–11](#)); and in Solomon's reign and thereafter ([1 Ki. 4](#); [9:15–23](#)), especially under Rehoboam ([2 Chron. 11:5–10](#)).¹⁴

In addition, as a religious centre, Babylon exhibits her idolatrous tendency to produce gods, cults, temples and religious symbols which claim allegiance to anything other than the true God. Babel was constructed because of the human 'refusal to live with the diffusion plans of God' (cf. [Gen. 11:4](#)).¹⁵ Solomon's cities (e.g., Baclath, Beth-Horon) were named after foreign gods ([1 Ki. 9:17f](#));¹⁶ so later came the prophetic rebuke: 'Israel has forgotten his Maker and built palaces; and Judah has multiplied fortified cities' ([Hos. 8:14](#)).

¹² Conn, 'CC', 227–230.

¹³ Tonna, 121.

¹⁴ These cities were built with forced labour ([1 Ki. 4:6](#); [5:13](#); [9:15–22](#)), disregarding tribal boundaries and reorganizing Israel into tax-districts ([4:7–19](#)). On the significance of Solomon's tax-districts, cf. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 133–138.

¹⁵ Conn, 227.

¹⁶ On [Jeremiah 11:13](#), Ellul, 32 comments, 'The reference here is probably only to cities bearing the names of gods, but we must never forget the importance of a name: giving a name to a city is giving it the very being of the name it bears.' Cf. Conn, 238.

The cities built by kings became political showcases of disobedience to God, encouraging worship in the high-places and making covenants [p. 144](#) with Gentile nations.¹⁷ Modern cities may not have the sense of transcendence or the sacred, but they celebrate (in a manner similar to religious worship) what people can do without God; this ‘this-worldly cult’, that sees only the temporal and rejects the metaphysical, has left urban multitudes trapped in the busy schedules of atomistic and aimless lives.

JERUSALEM: GOD CHOOSES A CITY

From the beginning, the Lord of human history had determined that Babylon will not be the final form of the city; He chose one city to represent the ideals of ‘the city of God’. Jerusalem is *the* city ([Ezek. 7:23](#)) chosen by Yahweh ([2 Chron. 6:38](#)) to make his name dwell there ([Dt. 12:5](#); [14:23](#)),¹⁸ the city where his people will live exemplary lives and offer worship before him. This was typified in primeval history through the line of Seth when people ‘began to call upon the name of Yahweh’ ([Gen. 4:26](#)); and prefigured in the Mosaic legislation through the ‘cities of refuge’ ([Num. 35](#); [Josh. 20](#)) which retained the city’s role (preservation) but changed its significance (liberation from death).¹⁹

Yahweh did not build his own city separately from the cities common to humankind; rather he took one city among others (it was even a pagan city) with all the common faults of cities. In fact, God actually did not make the choice; he let a man (David) choose a city for him. David chose a useful, militarily strategic and well-situated city, revealing God’s loving condescension to accept whatever humans offer to him for consecration,²⁰ when in God’s eyes Jerusalem was actually a worthless baby from its day of birth ([Ezek. 16](#)).

As a social organization, Jerusalem was called to be the witness to the world’s cities of the community and *shalom* of Yahweh ([Ps. 122:6–9](#); [147:2](#)).²¹ This prioritization of community in which each person is valuable is prefigured in Abraham’s intercessory attempt to save Sodom: ten people could have saved the city from destruction ([Gen. p. 145 18](#)); one individual and his family was delivered (as Rahab’s was in Jericho’s destruction later). As his people, Israel was formally organized as a national community symbolized by the tabernacle ([Ex. 25–40](#), cf. [15:1–18](#)). Why? For the meaning of history (and the significance of Jerusalem) is to manifest community among the family of peoples: ‘... inasmuch as God made humankind something corporeal, human community is realized in bodily form—and we call it “city”.’²²

As a cultural centre, Jerusalem was also called to be the model of justice where every citizen can have an equitable share of the production of the community. This egalitarian model of social life is founded on the Torah, given to Israel right after its liberation from

¹⁷ Cf. Conn, 230. Ellul, 38f. notes, ‘Of all the [OT] historical books, only the Chronicles give an account of the construction of cities ... [and it] consider[s] the city as one of the predominant forms of man’s opposition to God.’

¹⁸ Jerusalem is also called ‘city of God’ ([Ps. 46:4](#); [48:1](#), [8](#); [87:3](#)), ‘city of the great king’ ([Ps. 48:2](#), cf. [Mt. 5:35](#)), and ‘the holy city’ ([Isa. 48:2](#); [52:1](#); [Mt. 4:5](#); [27:53](#); [Rev. 11:2](#)). Cf. Bietenhard, 803; and H. Schultze, ‘Jerusalem’ *NIDNTT*, II, 324–329.

¹⁹ Cf. Conn, 249; and de Vaux, 68–74.

²⁰ It is interesting to note that David did not first give Jerusalem a holy army or prosperous economy. The city was taken only during David’s time ([2 Sam. 5:6f.](#)).

²¹ Conn, 240.

²² Tonna, 123.

Egyptian slavery; from its independence, Israel was called to be a nation of small peasant-entrepreneurs who owned property communally and redistributed their land equally among its families once every fiftieth year.²³ Israel's 'decentralized state' ('not like the nations') lasted for about 200 years, until the rise of the monarchy in the middle 12th century BC, due to pressures from the Philistines; thereby Israel lapsed into the oppressive hierarchical social order 'like other nations' ([1 Sam. 8:4, 20](#), cf. vv. [11–18](#)). But God raised prophets who constantly reminded Israel of its past 'Golden Age', that those who lived in Jerusalem (especially the kings) should live in justice ([1 Ki. 21](#); [Isa. 1:10–27](#); [5:8](#); [Jer. 5:1, 27f](#); [7:5–7](#); [9:3–6](#); [22:3](#), [13–17](#), etc.). In the post-exilic, rebuilt Jerusalem, Nehemiah Corrected oppressive practices ([Neh. 5:1–13](#)), avoided living on taxes ([5:14–19](#)), and made the city a centre of sharing of earth's produce ([12:44–47](#); [13:5, 13](#), cf. [11:1–3](#)).

At the same time, Jerusalem was called to be a model religious centre marked by faith in Yahweh. Israel considered Jerusalem as the spiritual centre of the world, for Yahweh dwelt in Zion ([Isa. 8:18](#), cf. [2:2f](#); [Mic. 4:1f](#)): 'Historical experiences, but also theological p. 146 reflection, strengthened and extended the idea of the inviolability and indestructibility of the temple city' (cf. [Isa. 36f](#); [2 Ki. 18f](#); [2 Chron. 32](#); [Jer. 7:4](#));²⁴ even during and after the exile, eschatological hopes focused in a renewed permanent *earthly* Jerusalem. Its trust is to be exclusively on God alone; its king must not depend on horses or foreign alliances, nor on wealth (Dr. [17:14–17](#)), but in obedience to Yahweh's Torah (vv. [18–20](#)).

THE NEW JERUSALEM

However, Jerusalem's history reveals that this chosen city of the chosen people of God failed to fulfil the purposes of Yahweh. (This shows that the city tends to become *selfish, unjust and idolatrous*.) Jerusalem developed to be like Sodom or Babylon: bloody ([Mic. 3:10](#); [Ezk. 16:6f](#)), proud ([Jer. 13:9](#)), oppressive ([Ezk. 16:48–58](#), esp. v. [49](#)) and idolatrous ([Jer. 19:11](#) ff; [Ezk. 16:21, 52](#)).²⁵ Calls to repentance (e.g., [Ezk. 22:2–4](#)) went unheeded, even when they came from the Messiah himself (cf. [Mt. 23:37–39](#)).

Therefore, the eschatological vision of a New Jerusalem from heaven has developed: though the earthly Jerusalem falls, God's purposes will prevail, for surely the New Jerusalem will be manifested on the new earth ([Ezek. 40–48](#); [Rev. 21:2, 18ff](#); cf. [Isa. 33](#); [Jer. 31:38–40](#)).²⁶ God will provide a final consummation in which humanity's valued accomplishments in Babylon or Jerusalem will be gathered up into the eternal city.

²³ Recent OT scholarship shows that each of Israel's tribe was autonomous, consisting of a collection of extended families organized into mutual-protection 'clans'; their land was divided into tribal allotments and subdivided for family use, given by Yahweh to them in perpetuity for stewardship; they became one 'state' only for mutual self-defence and common religious practices; cf. D. C. Hester, 'Economics in the Old Testament,' *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (Harper & Row, 1985), 243f. G. E. Mendenhall, 'The Hebrew Conquest of Palestine', *Biblical Archaeologist*, 25 (1962) 66–87 maintains that this was promoted and even created by Israel's religion (Yahwism), but N. Gottwald, *The Tribes of Yahweh* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1979) believes that Yahwism is only one of the factors that *supported* (not *created*) the egalitarian social ideals of early Israel.

²⁴ Cf. Schultze, 325f. Conn, 239 also observes, 'Preeminently ... the theme of redemption and the Edenic return to peace in God's dwelling place focuses on Jerusalem in the Old Testament.'

²⁵ Cf. Hester, 244f. Jerusalem killed the prophets ([Mt. 23:37](#)) and the Messiah ([Rev. 11:8](#), cf. [Lk. 13:33](#)), thus its downfall is sure ([Mt. 24:2f](#) para.).

²⁶ The eschatological hope was retained in Judaism ([Sir. 36:12f](#); the fourteenth of eighteen benedictions; cf. [2 Esd. 7:26](#); [8:52](#)); see Bietenhard, 803.

Socially, people will be living in full community: not just 'being together', but also 'living together'. God's love will be manifested in its fullness, binding all peoples together as they fellowship with God himself ([Rev. 21:7](#)), as brothers and sisters in communion together with the Father (cf. [1 Jn. 1:1-4](#)). The gates will never be closed ([Rev. 21:24-27](#); [Isa. 26:2](#)) since all nations are welcome ([Jer. 3:17](#); [Ps. 87:4f](#)).

Culturally, the New Jerusalem will be known for its *shalom* built upon justice (cf. [Isa. 11:4](#); [Ps. 72](#); [Mt. 25:31-46](#)). An innocent child [p. 147](#) will become its righteous king, and oppression will be gone forever ([Isa. 9](#)). It is indeed the restored and egalitarian paradise of God ([Rev. 21:1-22:3](#)).

Religiously, the eschatological city will have no more need for temples, for God is the Temple and will be all in all ([Rev. 21:7](#), [11](#), [23](#), cf. [Ezk. 48:35](#); [Isa. 60:18](#); [Jer. 3:17](#)). In [Ezekiel 40-48](#), the New Jerusalem grows out of the temple, not out of Jerusalem; because the city has no human foundation (cf. [Hebrews 11:16](#)) and is God's gift to humanity ([Rev. 3:12](#); [21:2](#), [10](#)).

CHURCH: GOD IS TRANSFORMING THE CITY TODAY

The challenge of biblical revelation is that the eschatological reality of the New Jerusalem is not just to be fulfilled in the future, but is also to be the basis for God's construction of 'new cities' on earth today. God is calling out a people called the Church to be his agent of transformation in the cities since Pentecost until the New Jerusalem is finally unveiled.

The Church is the vanguard or the 'firstfruits' of God's new creation; it is the New Jerusalem 'already', though its full consummation is 'not yet'. While it seeks for the heavenly city ([Heb. 11:10](#), [16](#); [13:14](#)), it already partakes of the citizenship of the heavenly Jerusalem ([Gal. 4:25](#), cf. [Eph. 2:19](#); [Col. 3:1-4](#); [Phil. 3:20](#)). Manifesting its heavenly archetype on earth in different urban contexts is thus one of the significant ways of looking at its mission in history.

Let us look at some of the major themes involved with the Church's role in transforming the city into New Jerusalem on earth, or changing Babylons into Jerusalems in history.

As a Social System

On the sociological level, the Church is called to transform the selfcentred, individualistic city into a self-giving, co-operative community, at least in four main ways:

First, the Church must proclaim the eschatological vision of the reign of God concretely seen in the New Jerusalem; it is not a utopian dream, but a revelation of the future already given by God to humankind. Based on this vision, the Church may be able to discern (sometimes imperfectly) the acts of God in the events, movements and [p. 148](#) structures in the city.²⁷ The vision will guide and inform the Church's efforts to establish urban justice and righteousness, not to bring in the New Jerusalem directly, but to be faithful signs or witnesses of it in a world filled with Babylons. Besides, like any movement or institution, the Church will be able to influence the city for good only from the positive advocacy of an alternative city-model better than those presented by others.

Some have felt that proclamation is a weak, unprofitable aspect of the Church's mission. But this view fails to understand that what is proclaimed is a costly (even

²⁷ Tonna, 119. The Bible does not explicitly reveal what future humanity would have had, had Adam and Eve not disobeyed God. But it seems clear that if the first couple obeyed the cultural mandate, humanity would have built perfect cities, grand technologies and magnificent cultures—all in a beautiful harmony of multiplex diversities.

subversive) radical demand for repentance (the city must acknowledge its Babylonian nature) and faith (that it will obey Yahweh and become a theocracy under his kingship). Proclamation includes denunciation of sin and presentation of God's righteousness, and thus it serves to inhibit evil and encourage the good.²⁸ The Bible includes the story of how one of the most cruel cities (Nineveh) was entirely brought to full repentance through the message of a reluctant preacher.^{subscription}

Second, the Church must incarnate itself *in* the city to demonstrate God's love and power *in* a Babylon. It is very tempting indeed to carry out proclamation from a safe distance, by stationing ourselves away from the pressures and dangers of the city. But God has proposed that his redemption plan will follow the pattern of incarnation:²⁹ immersion in the very context of those who are to be redeemed.

This incarnational model was supremely revealed in Christ who 'tabernacled' himself among those whom he came to save. In the Old Testament, God positioned many heroes of faith among the powers of the city: Abraham ([Gen. 14:1–20](#)), Joseph, Moses, David, Esther, etc. Even Babylon was served by godly leaders, like Daniel and Ezekiel. And in the New Testament, instead of following the imperial, Babylonian pattern of destroying existing cities and establishing new ones, the early church entered into existing cities and planted 'bridgeheads' within them rather than planting new cities.³⁰ p. 149

Third, the Church must establish model communities in the city; it must serve as God's showcase of his purposes for the city through its life of mutual love ([Jn. 13:34f](#); [17:21–23](#)),³¹ as exemplified by the Spirit-filled earliest church in Jerusalem itself ([Acts 2:41–47](#); [4:32–37](#)). God's saving presence has been incarnating itself in small groups of redeemed people within the city; Christians become God's witnesses in the city in the form of networks of small groups there.³²

The Church's identity is intimately linked with (not separated nor segregated from) the city in which it was located: the idea of more than one church in the same city is never mentioned in the New Testament;³³ rather all Christians living in the same city formed a single unit. This reveals that the early church demonstrated a new model of community

²⁸ Those who raise issues or advocate positive changes help city leaders to be alert to their duties and to mobilize their resources to meet needs.

²⁹ Though raised in a rural town, Jesus was no stranger to Jerusalem ([Lk. 22–25](#), [41–51](#); [9:51–53](#)); cf. Conn, 242f. On why he was based in a provincial area, see below.

³⁰ T. W. Manson, 'Martyrs and Martyrdom, I', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 39 (1957), 477 observes that whereas Alexander the Great and his successors established Greek cities (as centres of hellenistic culture) in the strategic places they conquered, 'that policy was reversed by St. Paul. He did not establish new cities; he was content to attack the cities that were already established at strategic points and capture and hold them for the Christian gospel.'

³¹ For a more nuanced discussion of the biblical conception of community, cf. P. D. Hanson, *The People Called* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

³² 'Networks' is used here not to refer to a loose organization of people with occasional contacts, but to a close community of individuals and groups who mutually affect each other's identity, values and lifestyles, yet not formally organized.

³³ Planting new churches in each city did not break the unity of the church universal. It is significant that the use of the term *ekklesia* in the NT coincides with the boundaries of any given city (e.g., Jerusalem, Antioch, Corinth, etc.). References to churches *by region* are always plural. The Church Fathers addressed letters to 'the church that is in ...', 'the church that is in pilgrimage in ...' or 'that resides at ...', which later evolved to the usage of *paroikia* or 'parish'. Thus, to the early church, the *ekklesia* is the eschatological reality that is historically seen in decentralized groups of those who share a common identity as God's people in each city.

(unity at the city level) and understood its mission to be co-extensive with the city.³⁴ At the same time, each city-defined Church was subdivided and based in house-churches (most probably because the urban households were the basic, natural community grouping then),³⁵ and there was no central city-wide organization nor p. 150 external hierarchy for each city-church.³⁶ Thus it seems clear that it is through its city-defined framework and its decentralized confederation of small groups (where *koinonia* is actually experienced) that the Church finds its unity, mission and organizational structure.

Lastly, in relation to its efforts to build community, the Church must help the helpless in the city. The city tends to be uncaring and insensitive to the needs of its constituency, especially the poor.³⁷ By its lifestyle of sharing with the needy (which has its archetype in the 'common purse' of Jesus' apostolic band and the 'communal property' of the earliest church in Jerusalem),³⁸ the Church demonstrates to the city its message that people will be judged by their concern for the poor in their midst (cf. [Mt. 25:31-46](#)).

The concern of the redeemed community for the needy is based on creation: every person (not just the 'blessed') is created in the image of God, and thus should have the necessary resources for life. In the Exodus, Israel experienced Yahweh's love for the underprivileged ([Ex. 3:7-12](#)); he delivered needy people from their conditions of misery. Thus, Yahweh judged Sodom for not caring for the poor in her midst ([Ezk. 16:49](#)). God created each person to image himself, thus each deserves access to life's basic necessities for survival and dignified subsistence.³⁹

As a Cultural Centre

Besides seeking to transform the city as a social system, the Church must also try to effect change in the city as a cultural centre. Sociocultural progress will certainly go on, with or without the Church's interference or endorsement. But the Church must help the city set

³⁴ This contrasts with their contemporary models, e.g., synagogues, philosophical Schools and *thiasoi* of the mystery religions. This calls for re-examination of denominational structures and mission brand names. Cf. Tonna, 125.

³⁵ References to house-churches are [1Cor. 16:9](#); [Rom. 16:5](#); [Phil. 4:15](#); Philm. 2. On the existence of multiple house-churches in a city, cf. J. Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 62f; A. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity, Second Enlarged Ed.* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 69; and P. Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief an Philemon* (Zurich: Benzinger, 1981), 72-75. On the contemporary practice of house-churches, cf. C. Guy, 'Pilgrimage Toward the House-Church,' in Greenway, *op. cit.*, 107-127, and H. Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975).

³⁶ Bakke, 20f., who also notes that the apostles always left the churches in the hands of local resident (house-church!) leaders; also cf. Tonna, 125.

³⁷ The city neglects and even humiliates the poor. In Asia, this can also be seen in national elites riding on the poverty of the majority. The middle class and those who succeed in getting out of the lower class strive and compete to gain a higher standard of living, and often forget the community and the conditions from which they have risen.

³⁸ See [Jn. 12:6](#); [13:29](#); [Acts 2:44f](#); cf. [Acts 6:1-7](#); [1 Jn. 3:17f](#); Js. 2:15-17. As in the OT where Yahweh alone had the right to own real estate in the Promised Land, the NT Church holds property together 'in trust', ready to be shared gladly to meet needs in the community, free from covetousness ([Col. 3:5](#)) and free to live in contentment and simplicity ([Heb. 13:5](#); [1 Tim. 6:6-10](#)); cf. Conn, 257f.

³⁹ G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973), 173 notes that *needs* include 'everything that a man, in his isolation, might need: wealth and honour ([Prov. 8:18, 21](#)), guidance and security in life ([Prov. 1:33ff](#); [2:9ff](#); [4:6](#); [6:2](#); [7:4f](#)), knowledge of God and rest for the soul ([Prov. 2:5](#); [Sir. 6:28](#); [51:27](#))'. Cf. W. Brueggemann, 'The Kerygma of the Priestly Writers', *Z.A.W.*, 84 (1972) 397-413.

its priorities right in light of the fact that city development and [p. 151](#) technological progress have often resulted in more dehumanizing and oppressive conditions: prosperity has a lower priority than equality (cf. [2 Cor. 8:14f](#)); and higher GNP lower than social justice.

The major way in which the Church can do this is to decentralize cities, although this may appear to be detrimental to the cities' growth in power, wealth and culture. This is not a call to return to the village, but to multiply average-sized cities (or to accelerate the urbanization of villages). Let the villagers enjoy the same cultural benefits as the urbanites, but without losing the communal spirit of rural lifestyle.⁴⁰ Actually, it is only through decentralization that the city can provide true community,⁴¹ true freedom,⁴² political democracy,⁴³ and economic democracy⁴⁴ among all peoples of various cultures and subcultures.

To accomplish this, the Church must lead by providing models of 'little cities'. Churches must become signs, where diverse groups in the city can be in close Christian fellowship without destroying each other's uniqueness. No one culture will dominate or overpower the others, for unity in Christ does not obliterate cultural diversity (cf. [Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 9:18–23](#)).⁴⁵ [p. 152](#)

As much as possible, city-churches must decentralize into local neighbourhoods; it is in these 'house-churches' that the vision of community-in-diversity takes shape, community is realized, and transformation can occur, as the city-residents decide that their neighbourhood can be a 'Jerusalem'.⁴⁶ New church forms (often *ad hoc* and less permanent) should be allowed to develop alongside these residential church structures; in the industrial world of the city, new socio-cultural arrangements have evolved as work,

⁴⁰ So far the villages have been depopulated in order to concentrate manpower to keep the city's machines functioning efficiently.

⁴¹ No person in the city can possibly relate to all others. Many try to increase the number of relationships or group memberships, yet they grow lonelier, living with superficial 'friendships' and weak ties that fail to reinforce anything from their past. Hence, people lose their sense of identity, become alienated, powerless and even derelict; local neighbourhoods and families become meaningless and marginal. Decentralization into viable groups will allow people to mould their own lives in caring contexts better.

⁴² The divine pattern is unity-in-diversity, hence decentralization helps maximize the potential even for the smallest sub-cultural unit to create its own future without undue pressures to conform to the mass-mind or pop-culture; cf. Bakke, 25. Conn, 247 observes, 'All the cities of the earth are represented in the city of God, maintaining their particularities, their glory tribute for the city.' (Cf. [Isa. 60:15](#); [Rev. 21:3](#)).

⁴³ God's justice desires that each person will be empowered to make decisions that affect his/her family and community. Through decentralization, the smallest or weakest political unit can allow maximum participation of individuals; cities will then be less able to make demands for more production and industrial concentration without consulting the affected people.

⁴⁴ God's purpose for humanity is that each person will be able to participate in productive work (according to his/her ability) and to share resources with others (while taking only according to his/her needs). Decentralization takes away the need to develop welfare programmes, but rather encourages community projects that fit local needs so that the people will not be continually poor.

⁴⁵ Living together demands great tolerance of different groups for each other. To encourage each group to retain and develop their unique gifts, the Church must make maximum allowances for variety, and respect various customs and traditions. On the absence of centralized structures in the NT, cf. R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 48; and E. Hatch, *The Growth of Church Institutions* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1887).

⁴⁶ 'House-churches' provide 'democratic space' for people to ask basic questions about life and create new possibilities on how to organize their lives, while enabling them to heal the victims of urban life.

politics and leisure have moved out of residential areas; hence different forms of church life are needed.⁴⁷

As a Religious Centre

Finally, the Church must try to transform the city as a religious focal point. In order to do this, the Church must act on at least four ways, as follows:

First, the Church must relativize the city-gods, for the city is not neutral, but idolatrous; more Babylonian than Jerusalem. City-structures are not necessarily evil (for they are needed for social order), but they always tend to devolve into oppressive entities used for the protection and security of the powerful and affluent. God and his purposes are often neglected in all aspects of city life—political, economic, educational, family etc. *Thus it is the Church's prophetic role to denounce any absolutization of human/city institutions, ideologies and policies that fall short of God's absolute standards.* God must be recognized as Lord over the city; just as the prophets mocked the city-gods,⁴⁸ so must the Church call modern city-gods to conform to God's will. p. 153

Second, the Church must desacralize the city, urbanism and its Mammonism (cf. [Mt. 6:24](#); [Col. 3:5](#)). Cities tend to be Babylons which sacralize themselves, demanding the centralization of power and wealth towards themselves. Upon urbanization's hidden agenda are the dichotomization of life into public and private spheres, the privatization of the Gospel, and a weak view of corporate or structural sin.⁴⁹ It would be sinful, therefore, for the Church to allow excessive (or absolute) powers to the city (or *any* state or institution).

The Church must not blindly follow the urban pull; rather it should stay detached from urban things, avoid hoarding or accumulating, and lay up treasures in the New Jerusalem (cf. [Mt. 6:19–21](#)). By its willingness to part with anything with the attitude of contentment and without a twinge of regret (cf. [1 Cor. 7:29–32](#)), the church witnesses against the city's bondage to Mammon, and witnesses to the New Jerusalem's wealth through its *voluntary poverty* on earth.⁵⁰

This leads to the third religious action of the Church in the city: it must patiently endure (cf. [Rev. 13:10](#)) the city's persecution. Citizens of the true Jerusalem will often be the minority in this world's Babylons; they have to accept, like its Lord who came to

⁴⁷ E.g. Bible study groups, prayer meetings, basic Christian communities, etc. Cf. Cox, 136–138. Perhaps as a rule, churches should seek to transform each social grouping into a Christ-worshipping community.

⁴⁸ They mocked the gods of Egypt ([Ex. 12:12](#); [Num. 33:4](#); cf. [Ps. 74:12ff](#); [Isa. 51:9ff](#)), Ahab and Jezebel (i.e., Baal; [1 Ki. 18](#)), Ninevah (so Nahum) and Babylon ([Isa. 46–47](#)). W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) points out on Egypt, 'the mythic claims of the empire are ended by the disclosure of the *alternative religion of the freedom of God*. In the place of the gods of Egypt, creatures of the imperial consciousness, Moses discloses Yahweh the sovereign one who acts in his lordly freedom ... At the same time, Moses dismantles the politics of oppression and exploitation by countering it with a *politics of justice and compassion* ... It is the marvel of prophetic faith that both imperial religion and imperial politics could be broken ... Moses introduced not just the new free God and not just a message of social liberation. Rather his work came precisely at the engagement of the *religion of God's freedom* with the *politics of human justice*' (pp. 16f) and on Babylon, 'When the Babylonian gods have been mocked, when the Babylonian culture has been ridiculed ... then history is inverted. Funeral becomes festival, grief becomes doxology, and despair turns to amazement' (p. 75).

⁴⁹ Cf. Conn, 230–236.

⁵⁰ The Church's voluntary poverty is patterned after Christ ([2 Cor. 8:9](#)) and the apostles: 'as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing all things' ([6:10](#); cf. [Mt. 10:9f](#); [Lk. 12:33](#); [14:25–33](#); [Acts 3:6](#)).

establish a new order,⁵¹ the rejection of (and the sufferings inflicted by) those who cling to the security provided by the empty glamour of the earthly city. In humble suffering love, Jesus rode a colt to confront the powers (cf. [1 Cor. 2:8](#)) and wept over the coming destruction of apostate Jerusalem ([Mt. 23:37–39](#)); in any mission to overcome evil, the deliverer must absorb it by taking it on personally. For Christ this inevitably meant death (cf. [Lk. 9:22](#); [13:33](#); [17:25](#); [18:32](#)), crucified outside the city gate ([Heb. 13:12](#)).

Thus the Church must reject Christendom's crusading mentality, [p. 154](#) which tries to overcome the city's evils by power or by wealth; rather it must use the spiritual power (cf. [2 Cor. 10:3–5](#); [Zech. 4:6](#)) of suffering love, participating in Christ's sufferings (cf. [Col. 1:24f](#); [2 Cor. 4:10–18](#)) in trying to call Babylons to repentance and faith.⁵² Moreover, this means also that if the Church is faithful in its mission, it will inevitably become a church *among* the poor, and *of* the poor and marginalized.⁵³

Fourth and last, the Church must have times of retreat periodically, especially to gain spiritual vision and power to meet the challenges of the city. Though marginalized (and sometimes forced to flee temporarily, cf. [Rev. 18:4f](#)),⁵⁴ the Church must stay in, or force its way into, the city in order to confront it with the claims of Christ—just like its Lord who felt compelled to go to Jerusalem, though he knew that the godly were persecuted and killed there ([Lk. 9:51](#); [18:31–34](#)).⁵⁵

However, in order to have 'staying power', the Church must withdraw regularly 'into the desert', to be free and detached from the city's power. There seems to be a historical pattern of godly people requiring a key desert experience (or a *continuing* one, or *both*);⁵⁶ even Jesus himself had desert retreats ([Mk. 1:2–6](#); [1:35](#); [Jn. 11:54](#), etc.).⁵⁷ The redemptive pattern seems to start with spiritual power from the periphery, and then extend in mission to the centre (the city).

CONCLUSION

⁵¹ The city which Jesus revealed was different from (or more costly than) the one envisioned by the chief-priests, Pharisees and even the disciples!

⁵² An important implication is that the Church should reach the city through costly people-to-people discipleship, and not depend on technique or technology, impersonal events, media blitzes or simplistic formulae; cf. Bakke, 22ff.

⁵³ The NT Church started among the poor: the masses of Jerusalem (not its elite classes); in a colonized centre, not the colonial power. Paul seems to have consciously avoided cities where the well-to-do Jews were in greater number (e.g., Tyre, Alexandria, Berytus, Delos, Putoli, etc.); cf. S. Applebaum, 'The Social and Economic Status of the Jews in the Diaspora', *The Jewish People in the First Century, II* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 706f.

⁵⁴ Flight is an option, particularly if every means is blocked for Christians to fulfil their mission; cf. Ellul, 181 ff.

⁵⁵ Jesus also knew that not many will accept him and his sacrifice; in this is true love, that even if rejected by many, there is no flight nor despair, but proceeding anyway to save the few who will respond.

⁵⁶ E.g., Abraham ([Gen. 11:31](#); [14:23f](#)), Joseph ([47:29f](#)), Moses ([Heb. 11:23–26](#)), David, Elijah, etc.; cf. Conn, 227f.

⁵⁷ It is from the least possible place that God chose (and continues to choose) to reveal himself; the resurrection happened outside the city gate, too. Jesus lived as a pilgrim wanderer (cf. [Lk. 9:58](#)); 'not in complaint, but in recognition of the divine curse on the sins of the city, Jesus bears the curse of wandering that Cain had sought to escape', Conn, 243. It is in this light that the early Christian imagery of 'pilgrim' and 'exile' can be better appreciated; cf. Conn, 249.

So, to the question, 'Is there hope for redemption of the city?', the **P. 155** Scriptures reply, 'Indeed, God has a plan for the city and is working in history to realize this plan.' The city will be the fulfilment of paradise: the eschatological perspective of the Scriptures

ties the future of the city with the original, sinless part of Eden and its restoration in Christ. Even under the curse, man's cultural calling will be maintained. Adam's painful labour will subdue the resistant earth; Eve's travail will fill it.⁵⁸

God is Lord over the city, and thus he does not need to wait for the full consummation in the New Jerusalem for its implementation. In and through the Church, he is transforming the city into a more humane social order, a more just cultural centre and a Christ-honouring religious centre. The presence of God's people in the city is a witness to possible reconciliation (cf. [Ps. 87:4-6](#)).

Of course, the Church may fail, just as Jerusalems tend to become Babylons. The reality of fallenness in the city precludes any naive optimism about it. However, God cannot fail, and will not let his plan fail: 'The ultimate purpose for which the universe was created, embedded like a seed in the heart of the world, will be attained. The whole of history meets in Christ, its alpha and omega.'⁵⁹ Though Satan is still the 'ruler of this world' ([Jn. 12:31](#), cf. [Eph. 2:2f](#); [1 Jn. 5:19](#)), he has already been vanquished ([Jn. 16:11](#), cf. [14:30](#)); Christ has already triumphed over the powers that rule the city.

Therefore the Church is called to be God's mission-community in the city, which stands for all that is righteous, humane and good, and denounces all that is unjust and inhumane.⁶⁰ Its mission is to set the city free to worship and obey God, calling it to repentance and faith, so that it will build its future according to God's revealed will. Such transformation will not occur merely at the end of history, but is always occurring in history, as the Church participates in God's urban mission today.⁶¹ **p. 156**

With such eschatological hope in historical realism, may the Church be faithful to God's mission in the city!

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Urban Missions: A Historical Perspective

⁵⁸ Conn, 237.

⁵⁹ Tonna, 119.

⁶⁰ The Church's mission is not to build a separate history, but to direct world history into a history of God-glorifying fulfilments amidst an ambiguous history of struggles for human liberation from all bondages (spiritual, social, political, economic, etc.) through its prophetic preaching and self-sacrificial service in the name of Christ.

⁶¹ Cf. Conn, 276f. This optimistic tendency is based not on youthful idealism nor sociological analysis, but on the eschatological vision. This is not post-millennarian, but historic premillennarian, which recognizes that the consummation will be brought about only through a dramatic intervention from heaven, not through human achievements.