

• Ps. Michael Crane

# Our Changing World & The Postures of the Church

The Bible tells us that history began in a garden but will end in the city (Gen. 1-3; Rev. 21-22). In contrast, it is common to hear Christians speak ill of the city, to consider it a place of crime, pollution, traffic, and stress. In the midst of our diatribes against the city, we miss the fact that Scripture compels us to love the city, pray for the city and engage the city. Instead, we have run from the city or built walls within the city to avoid any meaningful interaction with it.

Cities, like people, are dynamic. And they have seen drastic change during the last few decades, change that has not been heeded or echoed by the church at large. One of my favorite missiologists, the late Lesslie Newbigin, was a rare Christian who did see the need for the church to wake up to the changing cities around them. He ventured to India in the late 1940s and helped the Church of South India unify and become independent. After 35 years in India, Newbigin went back to his home country, England, only to find the church in retreat and not even aware of it. During the second half of the twentieth century, the world began to move to large cities all over the world. London, Birmingham, and other cities of England had swelled up with representative communities from all around the globe. But the church did not adjust anything to adapt to these changes. The believers still worshipped in their little country parishes despite the multicultural urbanization around them. This discovery by Newbigin launched a project of restoring the missional posture of the church to the biblical way of doing and being the church. A biblical church was to be a missionary presence in their communities.

Cities are rapidly becoming a dominating force in our world. It can be easy to shrug off the changes due to this trend as nothing more than superficial modifications, but there are indicators that deeper cultural shifts are going on right now, and a significant force in these changes is the rate of urbanization. In an article in the latest issue of *Foreign Policy*, Parag Khanna opens by saying, “The 21<sup>st</sup> century will not be dominated by America or China, Brazil or India, but by the city.”<sup>1</sup> Every

---

<sup>1</sup> Parag Khanna, “Beyond City Limits,” *Foreign Policy*, October 2010, 122.

single day cities continue to grow around the world to the point that this millennium is being dubbed the “urban millennium.”<sup>2</sup> How will the church respond to these changes?

### **The Hurting Urban Church**

The trouble is the church has not thrived in these expanding urban contexts. Church growth has been far outpaced by urban population growth around the world. Some churches have abandoned the city for the suburbs. Other, and perhaps most, churches have remained aloof from the city while remaining physically in it. During my years in San Francisco I was able to witness responses of the churches there first hand. Some churches entrenched themselves in their own closed community, oblivious to the masses of people around them. These churches remain theologically feisty and speak of the importance of evangelism, but are unengaged with the people of the city where they live.

Other churches had the look of a frightened, trapped animal. These are more aware of the public opinion of the church and are shaken by it. They are no longer comfortable sharing their faith in Christ with others. Sometimes they are even filled with doubt about the relevance of their Christian faith anymore. These churches incrementally move toward extinction, and therefore make no impact on the city.

There is a third kind of church that is able to maintain stability. They have done so primarily by attracting those who were already Christians before moving to San Francisco. They are transplant believers, and therefore these churches sometimes feel like they belong in another part of the United States, because the church culture seems disconnected from the San Francisco cosmopolitan culture. Once again the church is not engaging the majority of the city-dwellers.

I believe we can identify churches like these in cities around the world because they represent the majority of them, thus revealing the status quo. When the majority of churches remain unengaged with the city around them, it is no wonder that the church’s presence and influence is decreasing in the city. In the growing literature on urban ministry there is consensus that more of the same is not the answer.

### **A Biblical Posture for the Church in the City**

Jeremiah was a prophet during a difficult stretch of Israel’s history. King Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian empire successfully sacked and pillaged Jerusalem and took the best and brightest citizens of Jerusalem to Babylon. In the midst of this, false prophets were telling the Jews to stubbornly wait it out and that they would be freed to return to Jerusalem very soon.

If we put ourselves in their sandals, we might be angry and resentful towards the Babylonians. We might keep to our own enclave, remaining very guarded against all of the other peoples who were taken to Babylon. If we are somewhere temporarily, we have a tendency to invest as little as possible in the people and the place. Anyone who has worked in a hotel cleaning rooms can attest to the tendency for hotel guests to leave their rooms in a terrible mess. Just like the hotel guests, the exiled Jews had the same temporary mindset and did not engage the city to which God has taken them.

---

<sup>2</sup> Viv Grigg, *The Spirit of Christ and the Postmodern City: Transforming Revival Among Auckland's Evangelicals and Pentecostals* (Lexington KY: Emeth Press, 2009), 26.

It was in the midst of this turmoil that Jeremiah sends a letter from the Lord to those in exile in Babylon. Jeremiah 29 records this letter; here is part of it:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: <sup>5</sup> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. <sup>6</sup> Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. <sup>7</sup> But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.<sup>3</sup>

This letter is an extraordinary contrast to the advice given by the false prophets. First, God says that it was he who sent them into exile. God placed them in this utterly pagan, ruthless city intentionally. Even more astounding is that God asks these exiled Jews to seek the peace and welfare of the city, to invest themselves in a long term manner through building houses and planting gardens and having families there. I can imagine the Jews then said the same thing Christians today often say: “That city is no place to raise a family.”

You see, God’s answer to large, brutal cities is not for us to build a rival city or corner-off a small part of the city we can call our own. Rather, his instructions indicate that we are to be so engaged in the daily life of the city that we prosper when it prospers. When we seek the peace and welfare of the city, even one as hostile as Babylon, we demonstrate an alternative to the brutality of life without God.

One might be tempted to say, “Well that was the Old Testament; we are now under a new covenant.” Jesus reinforces this same type of posture in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:14-16. Jesus urges us to be a light and a city on a hill. We are to have the kind of presence in the city where others can observe the good we are doing. First Peter 2 calls us to the same kind of posture, challenging the church to be distinct in its holiness and actively do good in every human institution.

### **A Posture of Critical Engagement with the City**

These passages represent a general theme of Scripture that we, as the body of Christ, are to be critically engaged in the world. I say “critically” because it is not the message of the gospel to be exactly the same as everyone in the city. To seek the peace and welfare of the city is not a natural human posture. It is much more natural to seek our own welfare. When we seek the peace and welfare of the city we represent an alternative approach to living in the city. And we need to engage the city and all the peoples in it. This kind of concern for the city means that we are concerned about the welfare of the poor, the outcasts, and the strangers. How well is the church living up to this biblical challenge?

These Scripture passages compel us to consider a different posture for the church in the city. We must have a posture of engagement which means being more connected to the social fabric of the city. It is the church’s responsibility to intercede for the city. It is the role of the church to help and advocate for the poor and marginalized. Only the church can faithfully represent Jesus, the light of the world, to these growing cities. The choice is ours. Do we continue doing the same thing and continue to decrease our presence in the cities? Or do we adapt our posture to once again seek the peace and well-being of the cities by critically engaging the growing masses?

---

<sup>3</sup> *The Holy Bible : English Standard Version*. Wheaton : Standard Bible Society, 2001, S. Je 29:4-7

