

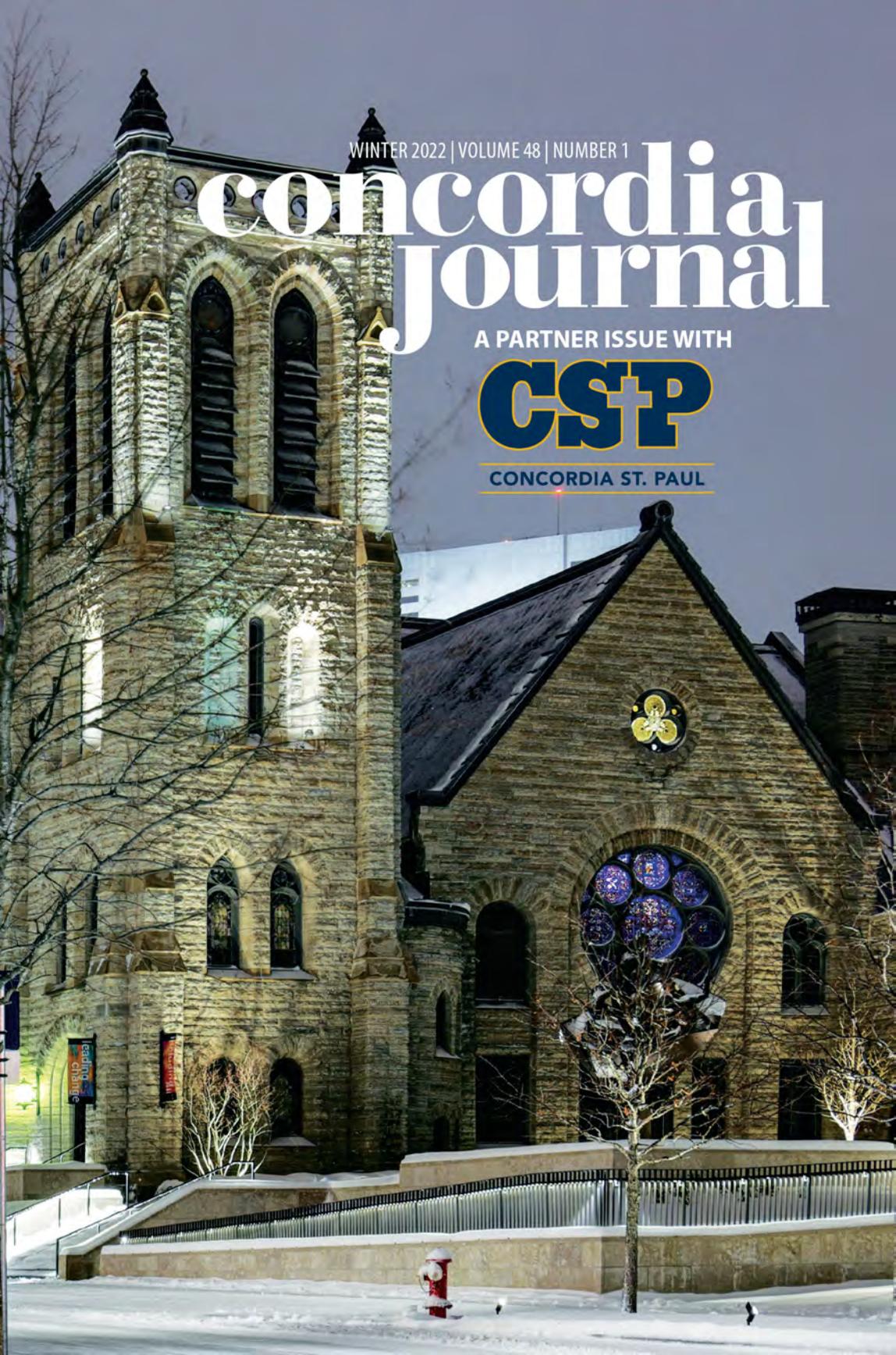
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*On the cover: Westminster Presbyterian Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota
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From the President of Concordia University, St. Paul

Concordia University is in the Midway district of St. Paul. This is a dynamic, diverse, and exciting place to live and work. God's redeeming and saving love shown to all in Christ's life, death, and resurrection is what empowers us to live with and love our neighbors within our university.

One of the signature pieces of artwork on our campus is the Luther statue that greets people as they visit campus or drive by on Hamline Avenue. Dedicated on October 30, 1921, the statue is a visible symbol of CSP's heritage and identity as a Christ-centered Lutheran university. The statue is also a visible reminder that "Luther pointed us to Christ. Christ points us to the world."

God has brought the nations to the Twin Cities. By accenting the Christ-centered purpose of Concordia University, St. Paul, we seek to create a welcoming, relational, and purpose-driven context for learning so that all students discover and engage their purpose for life, career, and service.

Concordia has a long history of engaging the urban context around us. Concordia opened doors for more students in the 1950s and '60s when the university launched the Metropolitan Teacher Education Program Selection (MTEPS). This visionary program equipped African American and other underrepresented students for careers as educators in increasingly diverse schools. In 1998, the Southeast Asian Teacher Program (SEAT) was established at CSP to assist in preparing underrepresented populations to serve as licensed educators, with a focus on Southeast Asians. In 2004, the Center for Hmong Studies was established on CSP's campus. I am grateful for this unique place of teacher preparation, scholarship, and history that is part of the CSP community.

As we look ahead to Christian engagement with urban, suburban, and even rural neighborhoods in the increasingly global, metropolitan context, I suggest that we be present and listen, encourage, and pray. When conflicts emerge in urban places, God calls Christians to respond with patient, Christ-centered hope. Years ago, a mentor told me, "Don't just do something, stand there." Sometimes there is little we can do. But we can always be. We can walk alongside and listen to the fear, the hurt, the worry, the heartache. We can invite our sisters and brothers to express their anger, pain, and frustration. And we can listen intently, carefully, and non-judgmentally to the cries of their hearts.

We can also encourage and pray. Recently a colleague expressed a sense of hopelessness when he said, “I feel like I am cursed.” The power of the CSP community comes from a God who loves us with an everlasting love and knows exactly how many strands of hair cover our heads. When it seems life has hit the bottom, then our gracious God, who will never leave us nor forsake us, “is all our strength and stay” (“On Christ the Solid Rock I Stand,” verse 3). Our God works in and through us as a community to be his hands and feet to encourage one another.

I am excited about this partner issue of the *Concordia Journal* for the thoughtfully written and engaging articles on Christian witness in urban and metropolitan areas. It is my prayer that this issue of the *Concordia Journal* builds up and strengthens our collective Lutheran engagement with the city. As Christians today, we are in a pivotal position to witness the faith that fills us and to be salt and light in a city, nation, and world that more than anything needs “the peace of Christ which far surpasses all human understanding” (Phil 4:7).

Brian L. Friedrich
President
Concordia University, St. Paul

From the President of Concordia Seminary

I am grateful to President Friedrich and our friends at Concordia University, St. Paul for their partnership in producing this issue of the *Concordia Journal* and in developing our 2022 Multiethnic Symposium scheduled for May 3–4. The theological faculties of our universities and seminaries form a community of scholarship that provides mutual encouragement, enrichment, and cordial critique to one other, even as we provide teaching and guidance to our students and to the church’s pastors and people. The articles which follow by Reed Lessing and Mark Koschmann (CSP) as well as Douglas Rutt and Leopoldo Sánchez (CSL) evidence the fruitfulness of such a community of scholars.

In that vein, one takeaway from this issue could be this: *let us learn with and from one another.*

A second takeaway is this: *let us love all of God’s children and value the place of every race, tribe, and language within the church of Christ.* Each of the articles that follows touches on this theme from a different angle, as we rejoice in our God who “so loves the world” and as we seek to faithfully navigate the often friction-laden convergences of ethnic communities, especially in urban settings.

And a third takeaway: *let us love our urban neighbors and hold forth the gospel in the cities.* As a church body and as congregations, our Lord calls us to have compassion and concern for our cities. We must not forsake the urban centers of our land, but rather seek ways to engage them with the gospel—wisely, persistently, and lovingly. Why? Just because there are so many people there? Well, yes, among other reasons. Recall how God appeals to his jaded and hard-hearted prophet in the closing verse of Jonah: “Should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?” May God work in each of us such godly care and compassion.

Thomas J. Egger
President

Articles

The City of Antioch as Bridge between Jerusalem and the World

Douglas L. Rutt



Douglas L. Rutt is provost and professor of practical theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. He joined Concordia Seminary in July 2018 after serving as the executive director of International Ministries for

Lutheran Hour Ministries. His areas of academic interest include homiletics, theological education and formation, Christian leadership, and missiology.

The book of Acts can be regarded from a variety of perspectives. Most see it as a history of the early church. They read it to discover what happened from the time of Christ's ascension to the establishment of the church in the Roman world. The book of Acts contains a wealth of material, covering some thirty years, on how the gospel spread. Others have recognized Luke's account as having literary value in and

of itself. It contains scenes filled with drama, such as Paul in Athens and Ephesus, and Paul before Felix. Acts can also be seen as an evangelistic work, in which the gospel is articulated for the reader in no uncertain terms. Examples include Peter at Pentecost (2:14–42), Stephen's sermon before he is stoned to death (7:1–53), Peter in the home of Cornelius (10:34–43), or Paul's defense before the unruly crowd at the temple (21:37–22:29). Moreover, as I. Howard Marshall pointed out, a fundamentally important teaching emphasized in the book of Acts is that the gospel was meant for all people, Jew and Gentile alike.¹ This shift, from what has been called a "Jewish

Author's note

*This article is a revised and updated version of an article titled "Antioch as Paradigmatic of the Urban Center of Mission," published in *Missio Apostolica*, 11 no. 1 (May 2003): 34–42. Used with permission.*

sect,” to a “new thing” (Is 43:19) is an overarching theme and message of this second volume of Luke’s work.

Thus, the book of Acts is a story of transitions: It is an account of how the church developed and grew, not only in numbers, but also across geographical lines and cultural barriers. The human element must be kept in mind as one reads this book. The people of the early church, whether we are speaking of the twelve apostles themselves, the “disciples,” the God-fearers, the Jerusalem council, the prophets and/or teachers, or any other designation or assemblage, all had their individual personalities, their strengths and weaknesses, their prejudices, and their cultural commitments and worldviews. The move from Jerusalem to Antioch—from a relatively homogeneous community to a large multicultural city—was fraught with misunderstanding and grave concern as the two groups, the Jerusalem and Antiochene Christians, navigated a way toward mutual recognition, acceptance and understanding.² If we are going to bring life to the book of Acts, we must take these human factors into consideration.

It is with this in mind that we look at the city of Antioch and its instructiveness for Christian mission today, especially to the city. We look at the development of the church at Antioch not only as a historical curiosity, but even more importantly as a story that can inform modern day mission endeavor to a world that is becoming increasingly urban.³ It was not pure coincidence that brought Barnabas, Paul, and others to Antioch. While the Christian will recognize the hand of God in the events that led to Paul’s missionary journeys, he also made use of very human factors to carry out the work of disseminating the gospel to people of differing cultural and social commitments. For a fuller understanding of how and why Antioch became the missionary center of the church, a complex of personalities, cultural and religious clashes, and the historical situation need to be understood and evaluated. Of course, it is not possible at this time, some 2000 years later, to fully understand how all the factors interrelated. We can, however, at least take into consideration what is known and what can be surmised based on the evidence at hand.

The Importance of Antioch in the Roman Empire

The importance of the city of Antioch of Syria in the Roman world should not be underestimated. Founded in 300 BC by Seleucus I Nicator, after his victory over Antigonus, the name Antioch was given in honor of his father. In Acts, two cities by the name of *Antioch* are mentioned, Antioch of Syria and Antioch of Pisidia, although Seleucus founded sixteen cities which bore that name.⁴ Antioch of Syria was located at the head of the Orontes River, just inside the bend where it turned sharply westward from a southerly direction. This placed it approximately twenty kilometers inland, east of the Mediterranean Sea. Although nearby Seleucia served as the port, it was possible to navigate by boat from the sea to Antioch.

During the period of the primitive church, it had become an important center of trade between the Mediterranean world, the Syrian hinterland, and the East. It was accessible both by land and water, being located on the best land route between Italy, Asia Minor, Persia, and Palestine. Antioch was responsible for the shipping of goods to Rome from Arabia, China, India, Babylonia, and Persia. It is said to have surpassed even Rome in its splendor and magnificence.⁵ From the beginning, Antioch was inhabited by Macedonians, Greeks, and native Syrians, as well as a colony of Jews who had been granted land by Seleucus as a reward for their military services. It flourished and became a wealthy and sophisticated meeting point for both Greek and Oriental cultures.⁶

When Rome occupied Syria in 64 BC, Antioch became a regional military headquarters of the new “province,” governed, not by an official or military commander of marginal capability or given to corruption, but by a *legatus Augusti pro praetore*,⁷ a capable, faithful, and trusted leader of the upper class. This provided for a degree of stability not found in places such as Palestine in general or Jerusalem in particular. Although Antioch was founded in a Greek pattern, due to the importance of the city it underwent many renovations and improvements along Roman lines, which not only added to its beautification, but also served more practical purposes, such as communication and defense. In short, the *Pax Romana* was much more a reality in Antioch than in the lands to the south.

Cultural Diversity

Antioch is often described as one of the three most important cities of the first century, the others being, of course, Rome and Alexandria. The population at that time is estimated to be as high as 300,000,⁸ or even 500,000, thereby making it quite urban, even by today’s standards.⁹ The city, therefore, exhibited several of the characteristics typical of urban centers today, including challenges of sanitation and general health. Magnus Zetterholm estimated that the population density was around 195 persons per acre. That made it close to the population density of modern Mumbai. In comparison, Chicago and New York have a population density of 21 and 37 respectively. Such densely populated areas are rife with disease and a high mortality rate. Consequently, to maintain the population of such an area requires a continual inflow of immigrants.¹⁰

With this multiplicity of cultures, communication to almost anywhere in the Roman world was possible. Many languages were spoken as traders, travelers, and full-time residents interacted.

Religious Atmosphere

Another significant aspect to the environment at Antioch was its religious atmosphere. A spirit of religious pluralism and tolerance (with its accompanying

moral laxity) had emerged. Glanville Downey describes the importance of this last characteristic in his definitive volume, *Ancient Antioch*:

In the time of Christ, a special religious situation had grown up in Antioch which was to make the city peculiarly fertile ground when Christianity reached it. . . . the city . . . had come to contain, as part of its normal daily existence, not only the old established Hellenic cults, of Zeus, Apollo, and the rest of the pantheon, by the Syrian cults of Baal and the mother-goddess—partly assimilated to Zeus and Artemis—as well as the mystery religions with their doctrines of salvation, of death and regeneration, and their promises for the afterlife. . . . This community had attracted to its ceremonies and its teachings numbers of Gentiles who found in Judaism an ethical doctrine that was more satisfactory to them than the pagan teaching. Thus Antioch was peculiarly receptive to the new message.¹¹

It can be seen, therefore, that the eclectic intellectual spirit, the interest in religious inquiry, and the prosperity of the city (at least economically) all combined to produce an environment in which the teaching of the gospel, when it came, could be received with openness, even by non-Jews. In this sense, Antioch was different from other cities that might have otherwise served as a transitional location of Christian leadership from Jerusalem and would be a linking point between the Christian message and the rest of the Roman world. For the gospel to spread, cultural barriers had to be broken down, walls had to be removed, and communication had to take place.¹²

Importance for Communication of the Gospel

A sizeable wall divided the Jews and the Gentiles. Taken from a worldview perspective, the Jews had as the center of their culture their *religion*—the fact that they had been chosen by the One True God, YHWH, for a special purpose. To them that was their ultimate reality. The Greeks had as their center, *civilization, and wisdom*. Knowledge and its cultivation were of utmost importance to them. It can be said that power occupied a central place in the Roman worldview. This means that for the Jews, everything revolved around their religion—their chosenness, the supremacy of the Lord God. For the Greek it was a matter of education. Knowledge was everything and led to the “ideal.” Certainly, it is an overgeneralization, but one might characterize the Roman mindset with the cliché, “might makes right.”

Now, looking at the centers of influence in the Roman world, one sees that Rome was the seat of power. Alexandria was the seat of education, libraries, and so on. Jerusalem, although not influential from a human perspective in the Roman world,

was the center of God's people. Where could these worlds meet and communicate? In Antioch more than any other city of the empire (οἰκουμένη). Antioch, therefore, both from the logistical and cultural perspectives, was a logical starting point for mission outreach to the rest of the Roman world—the Gentiles. It was the most likely place for putting into practice on a human level the breaking down, effected by Christ, of the middle wall of hostility separating Jew and Gentile (Eph 2:14–16). Once that wall was shattered, the other less significant barriers to effective communication of the gospel to other languages and cultures could be dealt with.

The Name “Christian”

That the disciples were first called “Christian” (Χριστιανός) in Antioch is significant. Luke tells us that the majority of those scattered after the persecution following Stephen's death spoke the word as they went to places like Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch. In the former two locations they spoke only to Jews, in the latter certain men from Cyprus and Cyrene spoke also to the Greeks, “telling the good news (εὐαγγελιζόμενοι τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν) concerning the Lord Jesus” (Acts 11:20).

As the number of believers among the Greeks grew in Antioch, Jerusalem's interest was piqued, and they decided to investigate. Although they had been through the remarkable experience of Peter's visit to the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:1–11:18), they were wary of the multitudes of converts from among the Gentiles in Antioch. No doubt, the notion that one should be circumcised and put himself under the law of Moses to become a Christian was still prevalent, although they might have accepted some ambiguities. The new Jewish sect (Christian) that was coming into existence, allowing for membership by both Jews and Gentiles without the strict obedience to the law, aroused at least the curiosity, if not the suspicion, of the Jerusalem elders. As mentioned above, Antioch was known for its immorality. Roger Greenway commented:

The eclectic intellectual spirit, the interest in religious inquiry, and the prosperity of the city all combined to produce an environment in which the teaching of the gospel could be received with openness.

As a large and rich commercial center, Antioch embodied the voluptuousness and corruption of a pagan society untouched by Christian influence. The city rivaled Corinth as a center for vice, and the Roman poet Juvenal, writing near the end of the first

century AD, charged that the wickedness of Antioch was one of the sources of Rome's corruption.¹³

It is easy to understand how even today we would consider a city like Antioch as an unlikely launching place of the gospel to the rest of the known world. It is understandable that the Jewish Christians in Jerusalem would conclude that without the law the Christian church there would soon degenerate all the more.¹⁴ Therefore, the church of Antioch must always be understood in connection in its relationship and the controversy regarding the conflict with Jerusalem.

The choice of Barnabas as emissary to Antioch was logical. He was a proven Christian who sold his possessions for the good of the church, he was of Jewish background, he had a diplomatic personality, as is evidenced by the name given him by the apostles (Son of Encouragement), and he also had previous experience with people of other cultures, since he himself was from the island of Cyprus (Acts 4:36–37).

Upon arrival at Antioch, however, instead of insisting on circumcision for admittance into the Christian church, Barnabas rejoiced to see the grace of God, and, true to his name, encouraged the new Christians to continue with the Lord (Acts 11:23). He soon saw the need for another teacher to help instruct the people and thus went to Tarsus for Saul. It was in Antioch where Paul's zeal and enthusiasm for the gospel could be put to good use. Possibly due to the atmosphere of religious tolerance at Antioch, Paul's boldness apparently did not cause nearly the disturbance that it had caused in Jerusalem (Acts 9:29–30). At this point it is mentioned that "the disciples were first called Christians at Antioch" (Acts 11:26).

Upon arrival at Antioch, however, Barnabas rejoiced to see the grace of God, and, true to his name, encouraged the new Christians to continue with the Lord.

Scholars are divided as to the origin of the designation "Christian" assigned to the Antioch believers. Its essential meaning is clear, however: The personal property of one called "Christ." Elias J. Bickerman writes that "Greek terms, formed with the Latin suffix *-ianus*, exactly as the Latin words of the same derivation, express the idea that men or things referred to belong to the person to whose name the suffix is added. In Greek as in

Latin the suffix *-ianus* is a substitute for the possessive genitive."¹⁵

The believers never employ the term Christian as a self-designation in the New Testament, however. They chose to call themselves "brethren" (Acts 11:1, 14:2, 15:1,3); the "disciples" (Acts 6:1, 9:1, 11:26, 13:52, 18:27); "saints" (Acts 9:13, 32, 41, 26:10); the "faithful" (Acts 10:45, 16:1,15); and "followers of the way" (Acts

22:4, 24:14). The term *Christian* is used only two times in the New Testament (Acts 26:28, I Peter 4:16), in both cases in a way which seems to indicate that it held negative connotations in its normal usage.

Yet, despite its perhaps original negative meaning, it must have been seen as a quite appropriate description of *who* they were. Fully half the population of the Roman world at this time were slaves, so the concept of slavery, of being owned by another, was not unheard of. The imagery of this label must have impacted the Antioch believers in several ways. First, they were, in fact, purchased by Christ. Christ, who paid a tremendous price for them, had purchased them from one owner, namely Satan. “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed . . . but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Pt 1:18,19). Second, believers are indeed owned by Christ. Being the property of another in the Roman Empire was not the most enviable position, to be sure; however, the concept was crystal clear and quite ordinary. But to be the property of Jesus Christ was something altogether different. Slaves normally had few rights but being the possession of Christ meant being a son of God, with rights of inheritance (Jn 8:35; 15:15, Rom 8:15ff.) Third, the disciples clearly understood what it meant to be a servant (δούλος) of Christ. Being Christ’s servant also had a cost. This the disciples understood. Indeed, some had already paid with their blood. Servanthood implied suffering, which the Christians were exhorted to not only endure, but in which they were to rejoice (Jn 15:18–21, Mt 5:11–12).

Another comment concerning the name *Christian* deserves mention. How fitting that in a place of such cultural diversity, in a location where the cultural barriers were being broken down both within the *Christian* church as well as without, the name Christian would first be used to describe the followers of Jesus. It is a name that is Hebrew in conception, Greek in form, and Latin in termination, which in-and-of-itself mirrors the unity that is possible only in Christ. Moreover, the interrelationship between three cultures and languages is seen, at least symbolically.

Cultural Diversity in the Antioch Church (Acts 13:1–3)

The cultural diversity in the Antiochene church is immediately apparent in the opening words of Acts chapter 13: “Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul (13:1). The names of these leaders represent several ethnic and social backgrounds. They also suggest different geographical and language areas. Thus, the leadership of the church reflected the cultural diversity of the church. As to the difference, if there was any, between a “prophet” and “teacher,” we can only speculate. Some may have served mainly as prophets, others mainly as teachers; others may have had responsibility in both areas. The order of the names of the prophets and teachers proves no special ranking or

Antioch was a meeting place for many nationalities, a place where barriers between Jew and Gentile were not nearly as prominent as in Jerusalem.

hierarchy of importance, nor is the specific title attached to them of the utmost consequence. Rather, the significant point is the names of these men, and what those names tell us about them.

The first to be mentioned is Barnabas, whom we have already discussed as being a Levite from Cyprus. Next there was Simeon (interestingly a Hebrew name),

who was called “the black,” (Νίγερ), quite possibly a black or dark-skinned African. Perhaps he was the Simon of Cyrene mentioned in Luke 23:26, whose sons, Rufus and Alexander, were known to the Christian community (Mk 15:21). Then Lucius of Cyrene is mentioned, who was most certainly from what is now modern-day Libya, North Africa. Manaen, the fourth of the Antioch leaders mentioned here, has the distinction of having been a childhood companion of Herod the tetrarch (Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great).¹⁶ The fifth church leader was, of course, Saul of Tarsus, a Jew, but born a Roman citizen (Acts 22:28). The leadership of Antioch, therefore, was a microcosm of the diversity of cultures, languages, and origins of church.

Unity of Spirit in the Antioch Church

As diverse as this congregation and leadership was in its cultural makeup, there was a remarkable unity of spirit that bonded them all together. This is quite astounding considering the kinds of people represented; for example, Palestinian Jews and Greek-speaking Gentiles, who were usually antagonistic toward each other. Instead of desiring to keep Barnabas and Saul to themselves, they obeyed the word of the Holy Spirit and sent them on what is called “Paul’s first missionary journey.”

Many credit this harmony and unity of spirit to the general social milieu in evidence at Antioch. We have already demonstrated the ways in which the cultural diversity of that city and its position of prominence in the Roman Empire worked together to facilitate the spread of the gospel among the Gentiles. Antioch was a meeting place for many nationalities, a place where barriers between Jew and Gentile were not nearly as prominent as in Jerusalem or some of the other important cities occupied by a large Jewish settlement. It should be no surprise that the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles should first take place in Antioch. At the same time, let us not get the idea that Paul and Barnabas were preaching a “Hellenized” gospel, which they contextualized and adapted to this situation. We must conclude that they were teaching the gospel in its truth and purity.

However, there is a much more significant and profound influence that needs to

be recognized and considered; namely, the message of the gospel was the power that ultimately enabled them to erase in their practice the artificial ranking of persons and places. If we are to believe that Christ came into the world “when the fullness of time had come” (ὅτε δὲ ἦλθεν τὸ πλήρωμα τοῦ χρόνου), we can also deduce that this included the timing with reference to the openness to change that would be a part of cities like Antioch, as well as the Roman Empire in general. The important point, however, is that the two biblical presuppositions necessary for orthodox theology in general, and sound missiology in particular, were recognized by a group of people who were ready to see them in all their implications. The presuppositions were certainly recognized by all Christians; however, they were more readily applied in practice at Antioch.

First, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23). Paul wrote these words while discussing the very same issue of which the book of Acts treats; that is, the position of the Jews as God’s chosen people in relation to the Gentiles. He points out that while the Jews had been chosen by God to be entrusted with the covenant, in the final analysis, “there is no difference” (Rom 3:22). Both Jews and Gentiles, in and of themselves, do not measure up to God’s standards. “What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.” The second essential presupposition is that all are justified freely by God’s grace, apart from the law. God was the one who had initiated and applies salvation. The right relationship with God could be established based only on the redemption won by Christ. This means, again, that in truth, there is no difference: “Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law. Or is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith” (Rom 3:28–30).

Not only, however, was there a complete atonement effected between God and humankind in Christ Jesus. Paul goes even farther and points out now that the “middle wall of division” mentioned above, which separated Jew and Gentile had been destroyed along with the wall which separated God and man (Eph 2:14ff.).

This concept, admittedly having been elaborated in writing by Paul at a much later time than that which is under discussion concerning the Antiochene church, was already understood by the church, at least at the cognitive level, yet perhaps it was not so easily assimilated. The friction between Jerusalem and Antioch would continue for some time. Paul, by the time of Acts 13, had already had to painfully defend the freedom and unity found in the gospel against the “hypocrisy” of Peter, and yes, even Barnabas (Gal 2:13). When the Judaizers from Jerusalem continued to visit the areas of Paul’s missionary activity and insist that Christians must become Jews also (Gal 1:7, 2:4, Acts 15:1), it finally became necessary for Paul, Barnabas, and others to return to Jerusalem a second time to come to an agreement over the issue. It

seems to have been decisively settled at the so-called meeting of the Jerusalem council (Acts 15:2–35). Circumcision would certainly not be required *of the Gentiles* for membership in the Christian church; however, to safeguard against causing too much offense to weaker brethren, certain other lesser requirements were imposed.¹⁷

The settlement of this controversy had other ramifications as well. It helped to settle the issue of authority in individual congregations. Paul and Barnabas's reason for going to Jerusalem in Acts 15 was not only to resolve this issue, but also to resolve the question of the real seat of authority for the church. As Meeks and Wilken wrote: "What Paul was resisting, in his confrontation with Peter, was the attempt of Jerusalem to extend its authority to Antioch."¹⁸ This is in no way to deny the authority of the apostles, who were the highest human authority in the church. Moreover, it could be argued that the way the matter was settled amicably in Jerusalem, by Jerusalem, essentially *established* the authority of Jerusalem. It does show, however, that ultimately the highest authority had to be the gospel, the teaching of Jesus Christ. Paul wrote to Galatia: "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:8). Then, for emphasis, Paul repeats this statement in the very next verse: "As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed" (Gal 1:9). The gospel of Christ, understood in its wide sense, had to be the final authority. Though Jerusalem was the mother church of Antioch, she should not overextend her control in a way that tended to subvert the message of the gospel. By the same token, the two churches cannot be seen independently from one another. They were in constant fellowship with each other. That they felt mutual concern for each other is borne out by the fact that Jerusalem sent Barnabas to Antioch (Acts 11:22), and Antioch sent disaster relief to Jerusalem (Acts 1:28ff.)

Conclusion

As was stated at the beginning, an understanding of Acts and the Antioch church requires a certain understanding of cultural, historical, social, and religious influences. We must understand Paul, Barnabas, Peter, James, and the others as human beings who had their own strengths, weaknesses, and cultural commitments. For some reason, people like Paul, Barnabas, and indeed the Antioch Christians in general, were able to integrate the full implications of the gospel more quickly than many in the Jerusalem church. The cultural situation at Antioch ideally suited it for becoming the springboard for outreach to the Gentiles. After all, the gospel went forth from Jerusalem mainly due to persecutions, which drove the disciples outward, away from their enclave (Acts 8:1–4). On the other hand, the first missionaries to regions beyond were commissioned and sent officially by the church in Antioch (Acts 13:2–4).

Soon the Christian church would become almost totally Gentile in makeup, and

the question of the Jerusalem church was settled. However, its implications for cross-cultural communication of the gospel remain today. There is still no room for ethnocentrism or prejudice in the gospel. There is still no difference, for all have sinned. And Christ still died for all. Paul's theology

and practice is still applicable today in the modern-day Antioch, in those places where cultures, languages, religious milieus are all coming together. The gospel must be presented in a way that does not require one to become a German, an American, or any other nationality to be a Christian. The case of the church in Antioch shows how it is possible in practice to break down the walls that Christ has already broken down for us in truth.

In this way, the city of Antioch is paradigmatic as one thinks of the extension of the gospel in the twenty-first century. The growing major urban areas of the world,¹⁹ with their plurality of cultures, ethnicities, languages, as places where new immigrants are willing to hear and consider new ideas, as centers of communication, travel and commerce, as settings where peoples from around the world rub shoulders, as places where the gospel can be heard and received and embraced, and, in turn, from which it can be communicated around the world, continue to provide opportunities for the dissemination of the gospel and the breaking down of walls of separation, between God and man, and between man and man.²⁰

Mission and ministry in urban areas will continue to present us with challenges in our practices and cause us to reflect on our theology. Mission forces one out to new contexts, sometimes new questions, to evaluate factors that had not been studied in the past. If someone once said that heresy is the mother of theology, it is also true that mission can be seen as the mother of theology, as nineteenth-century German theologian Martin Kähler famously retorted.²¹ An example of this principle is found in the record of the early church, and particularly in the example of the transition from a majority Jewish church to a majority Gentile church. Attention to the cities today, which far surpass ancient Antioch in terms of the complexity of circumstances, is required. The story of the Christian mission to that great city of its day can inform and encourage the church today.

The cultural situation at Antioch ideally suited it for becoming the springboard for outreach to the Gentiles.

Endnotes

- 1 For a summary of how the book of Acts has been approached, see I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: InterVarsity Press, 1989), 17–22.
- 2 One must not overstate the depth of the mutual respect and understanding. Long held cultural conditioning and assumptions are not done away with easily, like shooing away a fly. Issues would continue to arise, as Paul stated clearly (Gal 2:11–21).
- 3 The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs website wrote that the world population became majority urban about midway through 2009. Accessed November 29, 2021, <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/urbanization/urban-rural.asp>. The same department on May 16, 2018, projected that the world will be 68% urban by the year 2050. Accessed November 30, 2021, <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html>.
- 4 James M. Houston, “Antioch,” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 49.
- 5 C. S. Mann, *The Message Delivered* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow, 1973), 58.
- 6 For an informative but brief history of Antioch see Magnus Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch: A Social-Scientific Approach to the Separation between Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 19–24.
- 7 Wilfred L. Knox, *St. Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1961), 156.
- 8 Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch*, 42.
- 9 Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The Interpreters’ Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).
- 10 Zetterholm, *The Formation of Christianity in Antioch*, 30. This is similar to the dynamics of the large urban areas around the world today.
- 11 Glanville Downey, *Ancient Antioch* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), 120–121.
- 12 Nicolas Taylor argues that the experience at Antioch was a significant factor in the missionary career of the Apostle Paul, and to understand Paul it is necessary to understand the Antiochene church. The Antioch church, he asserts, influenced the “patterns and practices of his subsequent ministry,” *Paul, Antioch and Jerusalem: A Study in Relationships and Authority in Earliest Christianity* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 92–92.
- 13 Roger S. Greenway and Timothy M. Monsma, *Cities: Missions New Frontier* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 32.
- 14 Knox, *St. Paul and the Church*, 157.
- 15 Elias J. Bickerman, *Chronology of the Ancient World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), 118.
- 16 John R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World* (Grand Rapids: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 216.
- 17 There has been a great deal of speculation regarding the “requirements” that were sent back to Antioch in response to the assertions of some of the legalizing Jewish believers. Circumcision *would not* be required. However, they were instructed to “abstain from things polluted by idols,” “from sexual immorality,” “from what has been strangled,” and “from blood” (Acts 15:20). Much has gone into trying to understand why these “requirements” and not others. Three of the four points are matters of Jewish code, but one, sexual immorality, is a matter of general Christian conduct. Was it necessary to dictate such a demand? My conviction, looking at it from a perspective of human dynamics, is that it was a compromise to assure the legalistic Jews that the Antioch Gentile believers would not be an offense or stumbling block to the Jewish believers in Antioch (and perhaps other places where Gentile and Jewish Christians intermingled). The weaker brethren were those Jewish believers, who, although they knew cognitively that salvation was by grace alone, as Peter clearly stated (Acts 15:11), found it difficult to overcome a lifetime of observances and commitments. The demand that the Antioch Christians refrain from sexual immorality, which they would have known to do anyway, was simply to satisfy the fears of the legalizing Jews.

- 18 Wayne A. Meeks and Robert L. Wilken, *Jews and Christians in Antioch* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1978), 17.
- 19 The OECD iLibrary lists the ten largest metro areas in the world, accessed December 6, 2021, <https://worldpopulationreview.com/world-city-rankings/largest-metro-areas-in-the-world>.
- Tokyo, Japan - 36.5 million
 - Delhi, India - 30.1 million
 - Jakarta, Indonesia - 29.8 million
 - Shanghai, China - 26.9 million
 - Manila, Philippines - 25.0 million
 - Seoul, South Korea - 24.3 million
 - Cairo, Egypt - 23.5 million
 - Kolkata, India - 23.1 million
 - Mumbai, India - 22.3 million
 - São Paulo, Brazil - 21.7 million
- 20 Indeed, Jerome Crowe insists, “The decision to admit Gentiles to the community without first obliging them to become Jews was to have universal repercussions that have shaped its history to this day.” *From Jerusalem to Antioch: The Gospel Across Cultures* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 101.
- 21 As quoted by Ott: “The earliest mission became the mother of theology, because it attacked the contemporary culture.” See Craig Ott and Stephen J. Strauss, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments, and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), xviii.

Zechariah 8

God's Vision for the City

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“**F**irst secure your own oxygen mask.” This directive is familiar to anyone who travels on commercial airplanes. In the event of an emergency—“a sudden loss of cabin pressure”—we are told that an oxygen mask for each passenger will drop from the overhead panel. In such an anxious moment, parents might instinctively try to get air to their children. Adult children, for their part, might focus on

preserving the life of elderly parents seated next to them.

Such kindness might be instinctive, but it is not wise. If we pass out from the lack of oxygen, our helpless seatmates will not survive.

The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) is in another kind of tailspin. We call it urban ministry. One of the reasons for our decline in the city is that a number of members have left urban parishes for the suburbs. A second reason is that concerns of people in the city (like racism, segregated housing, police violence) are dismissed by many white, conservative Christians—including some in our synod.

Author's note

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Although some inner-city LCMS churches are successfully navigating their landscape, many find themselves in turbulent and unsettled airspace. Too many have crashed, burned, then closed. And too many have watched from a distance with frustration, apathy, helplessness—or a combination of all three.

Urban Ministry Objections

In 1950 only New York and London had populations over ten million. Today there are twenty such metropolitan areas in the world. By 2050, cities will contain 75 percent of the world's population. Closer to home, the 2020 United States census reports that 83 percent of US citizens live in cities—that is, in urban settings with over 100,000 people.

“Wait a minute,” you say. “Aren't cities losing their dynamic magnetism? Hasn't COVID-19, along with advanced technology, undercut their importance? After all, can't we login from just about anywhere on the planet? Doesn't this make cities passé? Yesterday's news?” No, says Edwin Heathcote. “Digital networking has not, as was forecast, led to a decline in the city. Rather, it has led to an urbanization of the rest of the planet.”¹ The consensus is that we will increasingly live in a world that is globally connected, multicultural, and *urban*.

Even so, it is tempting to think, “Cities are citadels of sin and havens of hopelessness. There's nothing we can do about them except hunker-down and wait for Christ's second coming.” More than one pastor has opined from the pulpit, “Cities are seducingly secular and God-awful godless. Their corruption is so entrenched that only Jesus—when he returns—will be able to straighten what is crooked, repair what is broken, and renew what has long ago become depraved and decadent.”

Where do people get these ideas?

The argument goes something like this. Look at the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9. What further need have we of witnesses? Cities reek with pride and arrogance. That's not only what we learn from Genesis 11, but also from Genesis 12. Based upon God's promise to make Abraham's name great (Gn 12:2), he had no need to build a tower in a city for his own renown (Gn 11:4)—instead he built an altar for the Lord (Gn 12:7).

This anti-urban bias continues. Recall also that God called Abraham to leave Ur—at the time a huge city with 220 acres with canals, harbors, and temples. Despite Ur's glory, it was for Abraham a city to be left behind for the sake of God's even better promise. Do you need more proof? The Hebrew writer says of Abraham, “He was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (Heb 11:10). The only good city is the new Jerusalem. Case closed.

It follows, say proponents of abandoning the city, that Abraham's relationship with the city of Ur is God's call to us as well. Abandon. Get out. Leave. Didn't Lot's downfall come when he “moved his tent as far as Sodom” (Gn 13:12)? Doesn't God

always judge cities like Sodom and Gomorrah (Gn 19)?

Those advocating these viewpoints believe there is a latent anti-urban bias in ancient Israel that Christians should emulate. And they have scholars to prove it.²

Those defending this perspective additionally argue that if the Old Testament doesn't convince you, surely the New Testament will. Doesn't the book of Revelation end with God pouring out fiery judgment on Babylon? The big, beastly city of Babylon? In fact, the thesis continues, biblical authors mention Babylon—as either a city or empire—260 times. *And it is never good.*

Not only did Babylon commit the first big city sin by trying to make a name for itself, during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II (605–562 BC) the metropolis reached the height of hybris. At that time two million people lived there, easily making it the world's largest city. Nebuchadnezzar built the hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. He even designed a system to irrigate them—lifting water over 300 feet from the Euphrates River into his terraces.

Nebuchadnezzar's palace was 350 yards long and 200 yards wide—or 630,000 square feet. It contained fifteen million bricks and each one had Nebuchadnezzar's name engraved on it. A wide ceremonial boulevard ran down the city's center. It was one thousand yards long. A double-wall system wrapped around the metropolis. The inner wall was twenty-one feet thick and reinforced with watchtowers at sixty-foot intervals. The outer wall was thirty-eight feet high and eleven feet thick. Nebuchadnezzar added a third defensive double-wall system. It ran for seventeen miles and was wide enough at the top for two chariots to pass each other. Babylon was “a bureaucratic, self-serving, and dehumanizing social system with economics geared to benefit its privileged and exploit its poor, with politics of oppression and with a religion that ignores covenant with God and defies power and wealth.”³

Those who dismiss cities arrive at this conclusion. Revelation 17–18 confirms Babylon's evil and the evil of all metropolises. In these chapters, John describes Babylon as a city of sin under Satan's dominion. Little wonder that prophets and apostles repeatedly call people to leave Babylon (e.g., Is 48:20; 2 Cor 6:17; Rv 18:4).

Defenders of this position also point out that St. Jerome aligns with their view. He once scolded a monk for having abandoned the desert for the city, “How long shall the grimy prisons of those cities corrupt you?”⁴ After Jerome came Augustine, whose book *De Civitate Dei* can be read as blatantly anti-urban. For example, “Two loves have built the two cities: self-love and contempt of God the earthly city, love of

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Zechariah 14 is God's
plan for the city at the
end of time.*

God and contempt of self the heavenly. The first seeks to glory in itself, the second in God.”⁵

It is not difficult to find voices outside the Christian faith that echo this sentiment about cities. Mahatma Gandhi once said, “The true India is to be found not in its few cities, but in its 700,000 villages.”⁶

Americans point to Thomas Jefferson who believed the ideal society consisted of farmers cultivating land in contrast to city-dwellers lusting for power and prestige.

The upshot of all this? Christians are to focus upon the heavenly Jerusalem and their idyllic future. As for earthly cities? Forget them.

These sentiments—though seldom publicly confessed—have brought many urban ministries into unstable airspace. The plane is going down. What should we do?

Zechariah to the Rescue

While the Bible rightly warns about the godlessness of cities, it does not reject them. This becomes clear in Zechariah. The prophet longs for the city of Jerusalem to be rebuilt and replenished (Zec 1:16), to overflow in prosperity (Zec 1:17), to team with people and animals (Zec 2:4), and to become a safe and secure refuge (Zec 2:5).

It is in chapters 8 and 14, though, that the prophet teaches us most about the church's urban ministry. Zechariah 8 is God's plan for the city in time. Zechariah 14 is God's plan for the city at the end of time.⁷ God calls us to live in this tension—join him in working for chapter 8's program now and hope for chapter 14's fulfillment when Christ returns. Zechariah invites us to strive for relative victories while praying for the final coming of God's kingdom.

Zechariah 8 and 14 function much as Hebrew poetry works on the line level—most often with the movement of “A, what's more B.”⁸ There are therefore important advances and intensifications from Zechariah 8 to Zechariah 14. Chapter 14 takes the earlier chapter forward, just as the second of two cola within a line of poetry characteristically goes beyond the first.

Consider Revelation 20–22. Instead of employing Zechariah 8, John engages Zechariah 14 to depict God's intentions for a renewed universe. Connections include the following:

- (1) nations gather against Jerusalem (Zec 14:2; Rv 20:7–9);
- (2) God resurrects people (Zec 14:5; Rv 21:12–13);
- (3) night is banished (Zec 14:7; Rv 21:25; 22:5);
- (4) God gives eternal light (Zec 14:7; Rv 21:23–24; 22:5);
- (5) God gives living water (Zec 14:8; Rv 21:6;

22:1–2, 17); (6) God reigns forever (Zec 14:9, 16, 17; Rv 21:5); (7) the holy mountain is established (Zec 14:10; Rv 21:10); (8) curses are removed (Zec 14:11; Rv 22:3); and (9) Jerusalem becomes holy (Zec 14:20–21; Rv 21:2, 27; 22:15).⁹

This is our eschatological hope for the future. It is not, however, God’s desire for the church’s urban ministry today. Those come—by analogy—in Zechariah 8.

The Context of Zechariah 8

A proper analysis of Zechariah 8 begins in the shadow of these words: “When her people fell into enemy hands, there was no one to help her. Her enemies looked at her and laughed at her destruction” (Lam 1:7). August 28, 587 BC was a dark day in Jerusalem’s history. Nebuchadnezzar II torched the city’s temple and destroyed its walls. Everything—the monarchy, the priesthood, the storied history in the promised land—went up in a puff of smoke. So much seemed closed and controlled by hopeless Babylonian imperial policy.

However, to the shock and surprise of everyone, Yahweh raised up his messiah, Cyrus (Is 45:1). Isaiah’s new thing exploded in the desert (Is 43:19). Uprooting and destroying yielded to building and planting (Jer 1:10). Dry bones came to life (Ez 37:1–14). The Persians defeated Babylon on October 29, 539 BC. Soon Cyrus II, the Persian king, allowed exiles to return.

Rebuilding began in 537 BC. Returnees constructed an altar and laid the temple’s foundation (Ezr 3). Then came problems. “The people of the land discouraged the people of Judah and made them afraid to build and bribed counselors against them to frustrate their purpose, all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia” (Ezr 4:4–5). For years people walked past the same pile of logs and stones. Despair and hopelessness kept the project stuck in neutral for years.

Zechariah’s mission? Urban revitalization!¹⁰ His first directive? “First secure your own oxygen mask.”

An Overview of Zechariah’s Eight Visions

Before the prophet reveals chapter 8—what Yahweh will do to rebuild the ruins—he announces eight visions in Zechariah 1:7–6:8, oxygen masks delivering large amounts of spiritual, gospel-saturated power. The visions (along with their explanatory oracles) form this concentric pattern:

- A. First vision: Universal in scope focused on Yahweh’s omniscience (Zec 1:7–13) with an explanatory oracle (Zec 1:14–17)
- B. Second vision: International in scope focused on Yehud’s enemies (Zec 1:18–21)
- C. Third vision: National in scope focused on Yehud (Zec 2:1–4) with an explanatory oracle (Zec 2:6–13)

- D. Fourth vision: Local in scope focused on Yehud's leaders (Zec 3:1–5) with an explanatory oracle (Zec 3:6–10)
- D.' Fifth vision: Local in scope focused on Yehud's leaders (Zec 4:1–6a, 10b–15) with an explanatory oracle (Zec 4:6b–10a)
- C.' Sixth vision: National in scope focused on sin in Yehud (Zec 5:1–4)
- B.' Seventh vision: International in scope focused on Yehud and Shinar (Zec 5:6–11)
- A.' Eighth vision: Universal in scope focused on Yahweh's omniscience (Zec 6:1–8) with an explanatory oracle (Zec 6:9–15)¹¹

The outer visions are globally oriented while the inner ones narrow the focus until the temple itself is in view. Zechariah's movement is from the universal, to the international, to the national, to the temple. The prophet's chief concern is with the temple and the personnel who serve in it. Why? That is where the gospel will be delivered by the high priest Joshua, his cohort of fellow priests, and the community's two prophets—Haggai and Zechariah.

The Visions: Lectio Divina and Visio Divina

Lectio Divina, divine reading, is a process of reading God's word slowly, deliberately, and prayerfully (Jo 1:8; Ps 1:2; Jer 15:16; Rv 10:9–10). In addition to inviting us into *Lectio Divina*—a skill Zechariah demonstrates repeatedly through echoes and allusions to earlier texts throughout these visions—he also summons us into *Visio Divina* or divine seeing. His visions are full of movement, colors, numbers, heavenly agents, people, and places. The prophet wants us both to *lectio* (read) as well as to *visio* (see) the gospel.

Zechariah's first vision and explanatory oracle announce that Jerusalem's revitalization has arrived (Zec 1:7–17). Yahweh's anger burned hot against the fathers (Zec 1:2), yet now Jeremiah's seventy years are fulfilled (Jer 25:8–14). It is time for mercy. Yahweh is committed to Judah (Zec 1:14) because located there is “my house” (Zec 1:16; 3:7), “my cities” (Zec 1:17), and “my courts” (Zec 3:7). *The city belongs to Yahweh*. Jerusalem's future won't be defined by the wreckage left behind by the ancestors.

After hearing/reading the prophet's first vision, the people might have thought, “How marvelous that Yahweh wields all power in heaven and on earth! He is using this might to shower us with comfort and mercy. Yahweh is going to rebuild what was long ago destroyed and abandoned.”

If it was only that easy!

In Zechariah's second vision enemies arrive in the form of four horns. The Old Testament frequently notes that horns imply military-political entities that bring misery and ruin. Whatever else can be said about Zechariah's four horns, this much is certain, they "scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem" (Zec 1:19).

To say that the horns and craftsmen "crossed paths" is to understate the force of Zechariah 1:18–21. According to a fundamental law of physics, the force of impact depends upon speed and direction. The horns and craftsmen are both moving fast, from opposite directions—and they collide, head on. It is four on four on a cosmic court. However, "horns" appears five times in this vision, while Zechariah mentions "craftsmen" once. We might think that the craftsmen—outnumbered and outmanned—are bound to lose. Think again! Divine craftsmen will grind the horns into fine powder. Yahweh has authority over every horn—every evil power (Ps 75:10).

In his third vision, Zechariah sees a man measuring Jerusalem—a scene referring to a time when God left the city during the Babylonian crisis of 587 BC (Ez 9:3; 10:19; 11:23). Now Yahweh is coming back. The city will have a vast population protected by a "wall of fire" (Zec 2:5).

Jerusalem's construction, a prominent theme in Zechariah 1–2, leads to temple personnel (Zec 3) as well as the temple's builder (Zec 4). Both visions, however, involve Jerusalem's citizens—one addresses the city's sin and the next speaks to the city's life together. "At one level, visions four and five are about the two leaders of the community, Joshua and Zerubbabel. But at another level they are about broader, deeper questions that have to do with the community as a whole and its relationship with God."¹²

The fourth vision answers the following questions. Was the exile so horrendous that its consequences were beyond repair? Had it soiled the high priest and people to the point of no return? Could they be cleansed and restored again? Was there any hope at all? Zechariah answers these questions with stunning gospel affirmations. "Joshua is cleansed, clothed, and then commissioned to serve God. Joshua does not have to obey in order to be cleansed and accepted—that is religion, not grace."¹³

This section addresses the issues raised in Haggai 2:10–14, namely what is Yahweh going to do with Israel's priests and people who are unclean? There is no getting around the fact that if the priests are unclean, so are the people (Hg 2:14). The office of the high priest affects the entire nation.¹⁴ Joshua's impurity is Israel's impurity. Joshua's cleansing, then, is also the nation's cleansing.

Zechariah's fifth vision (Zec 4:1–6a, 10b–14) shines light on the city's two prophets—Haggai and Zechariah. While Yahweh restored Joshua's position so he could deliver forgiveness through Israel's sacrificial/sacramental system, the fifth vision announces God's intention to deliver gospel gifts through the prophetic word.

Zechariah 4:1–6a, 10b–14 is the most stationary of the prophet's eight visions.

Unlike many of the other objects that move—for instance, patrolling horses (Zec 1:10), scattering horns that are then thrown down (Zec 1:19, 21), a flying scroll (Zec 5:1), and four chariots going forth (Zec 6:1)—here the lampstand is stationary. It is best to interpret the lampstand as a synecdoche (where a part stands for the whole)—representing the temple that will be completed through Yahweh’s prophetic word.

In as much as Zechariah 4 highlights Yehud’s governor, Zerubbabel, and the community’s two prophets—Haggai and Zechariah—the next visions deal with the community as a whole, especially its sin. “The lamp [of Zechariah 4] will not go out, but will it burn brightly and clearly? Or will it give off smoke and smells caused by the presence of contaminants, things offensive to God and incompatible with his holiness?”¹⁵

The movement, then, between the sixth and seventh visions is from Yahweh’s house to people’s houses (Zec 5:4); from Yahweh’s temple to the temple of wickedness (Zec 5:5–11); and from concerns about worship to the family and marketplace. The imagery is extraordinary, but the message is clear. Yahweh makes three points. “Sin discovered, sin judged, and sin removed.”¹⁶

Although separate and unique, Zechariah’s eight visions connect with each other, progressively moving toward a resolution. They are both independent as well as tightly woven together. Zechariah 6:1–8, therefore, as the last of the prophet’s eight visions, concludes with robust gospel.

Since bronze mountains (Zec 6:1) signify the rising sun, the sequence of visions is from deep in the night (Zec 1:8) to the first rays of a new day. The city’s restoration, therefore, goes from darkness to light; despair to hope; and from weeping to great joy. Victory is breaking forth from the eastern sky! Chapters 9–14 spell out how this will unfold—Yahweh’s humble King (Zec 9:9) will be betrayed for thirty pieces of silver (Zec 11:13), pierced (Zec 12:10), struck (Zec 13:7), then rise on the third day to be King of all the renewed creation (Zec 14:9, 16, 17).

What oxygen! What life-giving gospel! Let us count the ways! Yahweh returns to rebuild the city (vision one) and will conquer its enemies (vision two) so the city becomes a secure place for people and animals (vision three). Additionally, Yehudites will be forgiven (vision four), inspired by prophets (vision five), and empowered to live with honesty and integrity (visions six and seven). Victory over every evil power consummates Yahweh’s plan for the city (vision eight).

“First secure your own oxygen mask.” And if we don’t? Then Zechariah’s visions become ho-hum, cliché, just jargon. When we don’t breathe in the oxygen of Zechariah’s gospel we forget its freshness, its utter and unexplainable joy. What is meant to be vibrant appears blasé—no big deal.

Zechariah’s good news, however, is not black letters on white paper. It is vibrant and neon and in living color! It can be applied from a thousand angles and invokes death-defying confidence and courage. Zechariah’s gospel breathes life into dead hearts.

Do you see the need? Do you hear the cries? Cities are in turbulent airspace! “First secure your own oxygen mask.” Once we’re spiritually revived, we will take up urban revitalization with great vim and vigor.

Urban Revitalization in Zechariah 8

Compact prophetic oracles make up most of Zechariah 8. They appear in Zechariah 8:1–8 and 8:14–19. On the other hand, Zechariah 8:9–13 and 8:20–23 both consist of sermonistic prose. The phrase “Thus says Yahweh of Armies” (albeit with several minor variations) demarcates ten oracles (*Zec* 8:2, 3, 4–5, 6, 7–8, 9–13, 14–17, 18, 19–22, 23). The prophet’s ten sayings comport with the ten men who grasp the hem of one Judahite (*Zec* 8:23).

We will consider three of Zechariah’s ten oracles. Here is the first. “Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets” (*Zec* 8:4–5). Contrast this with Jerusalem’s sorry streets after 587 BC as described in Lamentations 2:11–12, 21; 4:5, 18. Instead, Zechariah gives us a beautiful picture of harmony and happiness, sharing and *shalom*. *Shalom*—God’s gift of putting Humpty Dumpty back together again—binds chapter eight together, appearing in Zechariah 8:10, 12, 16, 19.

The prophet contemplates a city free from military attacks by superpowers like Assyria and Babylon. Exile, destruction, loss, and chaos are banished. Jerusalem will be a place where old men and women, leaning on canes because of their feebleness, will watch in wonder as boys and girls frolic and laugh—abandoning themselves to play. T. C. Speers observes: “Too often men are apt to measure a city’s significance by its business, professions, and industry, its buildings, its wealth, its art, and culture. Zechariah suggests that we measure the significance of our cities by their effect upon two groups easily overlooked—the old and the young.”¹⁷

Though the prophet’s laid-back and relaxed account of the elderly is something we might see in places like Arizona and Florida in our day, this was a revolutionary image in the prophet’s day. “In an agrarian society, such a situation could only represent, whether in a city or on a farm, the existence of a healthy and stable economy whereby the senior citizens are relieved of the necessity of contributing substantially to subsistence tasks.”¹⁸

Contrast this bounty and beauty with the first and last verses in the book of Lamentations. “How lonely sits the city that had been full of people” (*Lam* 1:1). “Renew our days as of old—unless you have totally rejected us, and you remain exceedingly angry with us” (*Lam* 5:21–22). From beginning to end, Lamentations is filled with sorrow and utter sadness. Noteworthy is that the first word in the book, often translated “how,” appears in Old Testament funeral dirges, as in when David laments the deaths’ of Saul and Jonathan (*2 Sm* 1:19). The term denotes a scream, a stark emotion “that comes

With Yahweh the end is never the end.

from the deepest grief imaginable. It is a scream that comes when there are no words to express what you feel.”¹⁹ Jerusalem, the once glorious city of David, had been raised and ransacked by Nebuchadnezzar and his

Babylonian hordes. Israel’s long history—from Genesis to 2 Kings—culminated in total disaster. It all appeared to be a complete and irrevocable end.

But with Yahweh the end is never the end. There is death, but even more, there is resurrection. The days of unmitigated horror—when children who had starved, suffered, died, and then were consumed by their parents (e.g., Jer 19:9; Lam 4:10)—are over. Elizabeth Achtemeier provides these comments on Zechariah 8:5:

Little children can play in contentment and safety with nothing to threaten them—no pervert lurking in the shadows to lure one of them away with candy; no drug dealer waiting to peddle his poison to innocents; no child bruised or warped by abusive parents or stunted by poor nutrition or inadequate education; not even a bully among the group to terrorize the younger and weaker.²⁰

Zechariah also conceives of togetherness between men and women. The renewed city will be full of old *men* and old *women*, young *boys* and young *girls*. “This program is one of completeness, the two sexes coexisting in harmony.”²¹

Next, let’s look at Zechariah’s oracle in 8:9–13, his longest and most complex in the chapter. While Zechariah 8:4–5 focuses upon people, this section spotlights Yahweh’s care for creation. In doing so, it addresses the immediate past, the more distant past, the present, and the future. The chronological structure is as follows:²²

Zechariah 8:9: “In these days . . . on the day the house of Yahweh of Armies was refounded.”

Zechariah 8:10: “Before those days . . .”

Zechariah 8:11: “But now I am not [acting] like the former days . . .”

Zechariah 8:13: “And it will happen . . .”

Zechariah 8:9–13 contrasts with Haggai 1:9–11—an oracle envisioning a poor harvest, a small amount of dew, and a severe drought. Now these curses will disappear. Urbanites will instead sow in safety, the vine will give its fruit, the soil its produce and the heavens their dew. God truly loves the world and everything in it (Jn 3:16).

There is more.

In the last oracle we will consider, Zechariah takes up the question of fasting that begins in Zechariah 7:3 where some Bethelite leaders ask several priests about weeping and fasting to commemorate events linked with the Babylonian wrecking

ball that demolished almost everything in Jerusalem. To the fasts mentioned in Zechariah 7:3, 5 (the fifth and seventh month), Zechariah 8:18–19 includes fasts on the fourth and tenth months. These times of sorrow will become celebrations of gladness and thanksgiving. Achtemeier describes this transformation. “God comes to change her despair for delight, her suffering for singing, her poverty for plenty, her ruin for restoration, her abandonment for his abiding presence.”²³ A new era is on the horizon. Yahweh changes mourning into music; sackcloth into singing; and deep sighs into hearts full of endless hallelujahs! A new society of *shalom*—coupled with urban agricultural bounty and deep-seated joy—announces that Jerusalem will become a magnet for the nations (Zec 8:20–23). “The small trickle will become an overwhelmed flood! Just as the Bethelites came ‘to entreat the face of Yahweh’ (Zec 7:2), so now the nations are pilgrims with the same purpose: ‘to entreat the face of Yahweh’ (Zec 8:21, 22).”²⁴

Urban Revitalization Leads to Mission

The movement in Zechariah 1–8 begins with large amounts of gospel oxygen, breathing new life into dead hearts (Zec 1:7–6:8), followed by the prophet’s sketch for urban revitalization (Zec 8:1–19). Add Zechariah’s gospel to his Spirit-inspired plan for the city and what do you get? Mission. This is how Zechariah 8:20–23 describes the nations: “They come in waves—first in line are Gentile ‘peoples’ (Zec 8:20), then ‘leaders’ of city dwellers (Zec 8:21), and finally ‘many peoples and mighty nations’ (Zec 8:22). . . . This great influx of Gentiles makes the Queen of Sheba’s entourage (1 Kgs 10:1–10) look small by comparison.”²⁵

Zechariah’s evangelistic vision concludes with these words. “In those days ten men from the nations of every tongue will seize the robe of a Yehudite, saying, ‘Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you’” (Zec 8:23). The expression, “they will seize,” frequently appears in contexts where action is fervent and impassioned (e.g., 1 Sm 15:27; 1 Kgs 1:50; 2:28; 2 Kgs 4:27). Why are unbelievers the opposite of being aloof and apathetic? *They have witnessed urban revitalization.*

*God’s restored people are
God’s missionary people.*

In Zechariah 8:23, the proper noun “Yehudite” is singular but employed in a collective sense as indicated by the Hebrew plural *imchem* “with you (all).” Yahweh will not only put Jerusalem back on the map, but he will also use its people to heal the brokenness of the entire world. “Gentiles will see Israel’s God-given wisdom and insight (Dt 4:6)—for instance, the elderly living abundantly (Zec 8:4), children safely playing (Zec 8:5), God in their midst (Zec 8:8), fertile fields (Zec 8:12), joy and gladness (Zec 8:19)—and they will say, ‘Indeed, this great nation is a wise and insightful nation’ (Dt 4:6).”²⁶

God’s restored people are God’s missionary people. Beginning with Abram

(Gn 12:3) and continuing with Moses (Ex 19:5–6) the divine plan is that the nations will see Yahweh’s relationship with Israel and by faith some will become part of his chosen people. Yet God’s redemptive activity is not just on behalf of Israel and the nations. It also stands in service to the entire creation.

Conclusions

Models for urban ministry include despising the city (the church as a fortress); becoming the city (the church as a mirror); using the city (the church as a tourist); and loving the city (the church according to Zechariah 1–8).

Zechariah lived in the destroyed and dismantled city of Jerusalem. The walls were a pile of rubble. The ark of the covenant with its mercy seat and the cherubim were gone forever. The Babylonians had dispensed with the tablets of the Ten Commandments, the manna, Aaron’s rod, the Urim and Thummim, and the continual fire on the altar. What does the prophet do? He announces the gospel that comes to us, then through us—to rebuild the city. That’s the movement of Zechariah 1–8. To us—large amounts of spiritual, gospel-saturated oxygen. Then through us—financial seminars, counseling services, youth programs, low-cost housing, and the like.

In the United States, the number of congregations (especially LCMS congregations) in dense urban areas is extremely low. Globally, the population of megacities is mind-boggling. God is placing a great opportunity before us, but where do we begin?

With Zechariah. But also with Jesus. “By his grace, Jesus lost the city-that-was, so we could become citizens of the of the city-yet-to-come, making us salt and light in the city-that-is.”²⁷ Our citizenship in the city-to-come (Zec 14), by God’s grace, equips us for ministry in the city that is (Zec 8). And how is this done? “Not by might. Not by power, but by my Spirit, says Yahweh of Armies” (Zec 4:6).

Endnotes

- 1 Cited in Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 154.
- 2 Note, for instance, Jacques Ellul who contributed to an anti-urban, pro-nomadic bias in biblical studies (*The Meaning of the City*, trans. Dennis Pardee (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970).
- 3 Robert C. Linthicum, *City of God City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 25.
- 4 Cited by Harvie M. Conn, “The Kingdom of God and the City of Man: A History of the City/Church Dialogue,” in *Discipling the City: A Comprehensive Approach to Urban Mission*, ed. Roger S. Greenway, 2nd ed. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2020), 247.
- 5 De Civitate Dei, 14.28.
- 6 Cited in Keller, *Center Church*, 137.
- 7 As with many applications of the Old Testament, we cannot make a direct connection between Zechariah’s presentation of Jerusalem (a city with a unique salvation-historical significance) and patterns for ministry in today’s urban contexts. However, what the prophet says about Jerusalem in his book gives us a sense of what God wants to accomplish through the church for people in all times and places—including cities.
- 8 James Kugel, *The Idea of Hebrew Poetry: Parallelism and Its History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 42.
- 9 Lessing, *Zechariah*, 521–522.
- 10 Throughout this article, I intentionally employ the adjective “revitalization” instead of “renewal.” City planners trumpeted “urban renewal” in the 1960s, but it is often criticized by current scholars, activists, and neighborhood residents for at least two reasons. First, urban renewal often means demolishing large swaths of residential housing and replacing them with new (oftentimes more lucrative) commercial and residential properties. As a result, people are removed from their homes and forced to relocate to other parts of the city. Second, urban renewal doesn’t solve problems—it just pushes them to a different, nearby neighborhood. Jane Jacobs’s 1961 book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House) argued against the expression “urban renewal.” Jacobs’s book is now considered a classic and essential text for urban scholars, activists, and even today’s city planners.
- 11 Lessing, *Zechariah*, 73.
- 12 Barry Webb, *The Message of Zechariah*, Tyndale Biblical Commentary (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 93.
- 13 Anthony Petterson, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary 25 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2015), 146.
- 14 Petterson writes, “Cleansing was a massive theological problem for the returned community of exiles, and what happened to Joshua was of paramount importance for their own destinies” in *Behold Your King: The Hope for the House of David in the Book of Zechariah* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 50. Webb concurs, “The acceptability of the people of God depended critically on the acceptability of the high priest. He symbolically carried them into the presence of God as their representative and mediator” (*The Message of Zechariah*, 85).
- 15 Webb, *The Message of Zechariah*, 96.
- 16 Richard Phillips, *Zechariah* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2007), 121.
- 17 T. C. Speers, *Zechariah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1956), 1085.
- 18 Carol L. Meyers and Eric M. Meyers, *Haggai; Zechariah 1-8*, Anchor Bible 25B (Garden City: Doubleday, 1987), 415.
- 19 Ann Hood, *Comfort: A Journey through Grief* (New York: Norton, 2008), 139.
- 20 Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Nahum–Malachi*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox, 1986), 136.
- 21 David Peterson, *Haggai and Zechariah 1–8*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 300.

- 22 James Nogalski, *Micah–Malachi, The Book of the Twelve: Micah–Malachi*, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary, (Macon: Smyth & Helwys, 2011), 894.
- 23 Achtemeier, *Nahum–Malachi*, 141.
- 24 Lessing, *Zechariah*, 320.
- 25 Lessing, *Zechariah*, 320. Webb observes, “Zechariah understood that because God is the Lord of the whole earth, his people must ultimately be a vast, multicultural, multiethnic community drawn from all nations, united finally by their common acknowledgement of him as the only true God.” (*The Message of Zechariah*, 43.)
- 26 Lessing, *Zechariah*, 320–321.
- 27 Keller, *Center Church*, 178.

Who Is the City? Theological Approaches to the City

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The city is not a what, but a *who*. It is not ultimately a bunch of buildings, blocks, and businesses. If we see the city primarily as a particular type of *human* settlement, then getting a sense of the reality of the city is partly an exercise in theological anthropology, that is, an attempt to grasp not so much what is the city as much as who is the city. Without intending to be exhaustive, this essay offers a sample and

evaluation of four attempts to grasp who is the city, especially in the United States.¹ I argue that a bird's-eye view of selected contemporary writings on the city from across a spectrum of Christian traditions reveals a variety of theological approaches with their own anthropological assumptions about the people who inhabit the urban landscapes of North America and proposals for how the church should respond to or interact with these neighbors.

I call these reflections the redemptive, relational, dialogical, and eschatological approaches to the city, and explore the theological sources, views of neighbors, and the relationship between the church and the world that guide each proposal. The four approaches align with authors who have reflected theologically on their experiences working in various urban settings. They are Matthew Harrison (redemptive), Robert Lupton (relational), Timothy Keller (dialogical), and Eldin Villafañe (eschatological). The essay concludes with a brief analysis of their views and recommends a neighbor-oriented approach to the city that accounts for the complexity of their inhabitants within the framework of a Lutheran anthropology.

The Redemptive Approach

Reflecting on his experience as an inner-city pastor and housing “junior developer”² in a decaying neighborhood in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Matthew Harrison argues that the church “as church”—not merely as individual Christians or even as individual Christians working collectively through social agencies—has a biblically mandated “diakonic” or servant role to extend Christ’s mercy to hurting neighbors.³ Far from a mere economic issue, the housing crisis in the inner city reveals a deeper spiritual struggle, which the author describes in the language of spiritual bondage to demonic forces wreaking havoc on people’s lives and institutions. The author paints a bleak picture of city dwellers struggling to survive in a broken neighborhood filled with dilapidated housing, absentee landlords, irresponsible renting practices, and abandoned properties serving as breeding grounds for shameful and dehumanizing activities.⁴ Drawing from the Reformer Martin Luther’s depiction of the devil’s kingdom or rule in the world as the cause of maladies driving humans to deprivation, depravity, despair, and even death, Harrison ascribes to Satan the “chaos” that prevents people in today’s inner cities from flourishing and hearing the gospel.⁵

In a world where dysfunctional temporal institutions’ dereliction of duty has added to the disarray and neglect of constituents, the church’s diakonic role is to become a responsible corporate or “chief citizen” in the city by establishing a measure of order “for the increase of civil righteousness” amidst the chaos of everyday life.⁶ Acting in the name of Christ, the church and her ministers have a role in cooperating with, cajoling, and holding the local government accountable for the fulfillment of their legal obligations for the sake of improving citizens’ lives in the temporal kingdom.⁷ Although “constituent” of the church, this diakonic work ultimately lies in making room for the “constituting” work of the church proper, namely, the proclamation of the gospel in the spiritual kingdom, which ultimately redeems sinners from their captivity to Satan.⁸ Bringing order amidst chaos serves as a form of preparation for the Gospel (*praeparatio evangelica*). Over against the kingdom of Satan, Christ rules in his kingdom through the gospel and works of love. Drawing lessons from the confessional writings of the Lutheran Church, Harrison asserts that a pastor may freely carry out or administer such works of love or “diakonic tasks,” such as distribution of alms, care for the poor, and housing neighborhood renewal, without replacing his chief and essential call as a minister of the gospel called to administer Word and Sacrament.⁹ Proclamation and mercy go hand in hand.

The redemptive approach represented by Harrison’s reflections on neighborhood renewal in the inner city draws from theological resources that portray God’s world as a battlefield where Christ’s kingdom fights against Satan’s kingdom. Through the church’s gospel proclamation in the spiritual kingdom and corporate works of love and mercy in the temporal kingdom, Christ’s rule is established in decaying neighborhoods and city dwellers are redeemed or delivered from the clutches of the

evil one who wreaks havoc in their lives and communities. The local church becomes Christ's instrument to bring light and life to a world that is captive to darkness and death. The inner city is a microcosm of a greater cosmic drama where God and the devil are fighting for the souls of city dwellers. In this drama, oppressed humans are recipients of God's lavish generosity mediated by the church through her mission of proclamation and mercy.

The Relational Approach

With more than forty years of experience working as a community developer in inner-city Atlanta, Georgia, Robert Lupton has become one of a cadre of Christian leaders working among the urban poor who are critical of the concept and practice of charity.¹⁰ Although there are situations that call for immediate poor relief, a sustained focus on the passive-recipient identity of the needy leads to one-sided relationships that foster paternalism on the side of the giver and dependency on the side of the poor. As Lupton puts it, in such unilateral approaches “doing *for* rather than doing *with* those in need is the norm. Add to it the combination of patronizing pity and unintended superiority, and charity becomes toxic.”¹¹ The problem lies in the tendency of individual Christians and congregations to engage in one-on-one “betterment” activities that serve people in difficult situations, but do not yet reach the level of ongoing “development” initiatives equipping them to address their own needs in a sustainable way.¹²

Robert Lupton has become one of a cadre of Christian leaders working among the urban poor who are critical of the concept and practice of charity.

Two “temptations” typically lure people into doing things “for” instead of “with” the poor, namely, feeling good about helping others and doing so immediately.¹³ To overcome these temptations, Christians and congregations must move from a betterment to a development mentality. Accordingly, in his “Oath of Compassionate Service,” Lupton includes development principles such as “never do for the poor what they have (or could have) the capacity to do for themselves,” “limit one-way giving to emergency situations,” “strive to empower the poor through employment, lending, and investing, using grants sparingly to reinforce achievements,” and “subordinate self-interests to the needs of those being served.”¹⁴

When well-meaning Christians do things for the poor, the unintended consequence is that the poor are deemed to have no worth and thus nothing to offer to themselves or others. Even if done with great compassion, one-way giving ends up reducing the other to “the object of another's pity. . . . erodes human dignity

Christian community development affirms the resourcefulness of God’s human creatures by focusing not only on their needs but especially on their talents.

. . . [and] subtly communicates to the recipient: ‘You have nothing of value that I desire in return.’”¹⁵ If “poverty may be defined as having little of value to exchange,” then, the road to development entails moving someone from “dependency” on the generosity of others toward “the dignity of exchange.”¹⁶ By using the language of human dignity and value, the author evokes the biblical teaching that humans are created in the image

of God (Lat. *imago dei*). The key aspect of the image of God at play in the notion of mutual exchange consists of our common identity as “co-creators” with God—an identity that God calls us to model in a way that accounts for “even the most vulnerable among us as valued participants.”¹⁷ Therefore, a crucial task of Christian development work in the inner city is to “get out of the business of giving away” and instead “build value into people and relationships—value realized only when authentic exchange occurs.”¹⁸ In mutual exchanges, we begin to see the poor not merely as “weak ones waiting to be rescued,” but as “bearers of divine treasures.”¹⁹

The relational approach articulated by Lupton only sees a limited use for mercy activities in the context of emergency relief. Appealing to the dignity of the poor as one created in God’s image to be his co-steward in creation, this approach calls Christians to embody or image in their interactions with the poor cooperative exchanges or partnerships that are mutually enriching. Urban neighbors are not seen primarily as victims in bondage to demonic forces or decaying structures, but as moral agents in their own right who, given access to opportunities, have the capacity and potential to flourish.²⁰ The church’s task to reconcile people to God and to one another in Christ brings about deeper relationships among new friends, who see value in one another and what each brings to the community.²¹ Thus Christian community development affirms the resourcefulness of God’s human creatures by focusing not only on their needs but especially on their talents. The inner city is like a marketplace where people exchange their individual and common talents with one another for their flourishing and the good of the neighborhood. The goal of development is not merely to find sustainable jobs and housing, but to create sustainable communities grounded in an interdependent view of life in which all share responsibility for the stewardship of their God-given gifts and assets.²²

The Dialogical Approach

A pastor, apologist, and chairman and co-founder of Redeemer City to City in

New York City, Timothy Keller focuses his work on the “city center,” which as he explains, “unlike the ‘inner city’ or the working-class neighborhoods, is where there is a confluence of professionals, major industry and financial centers, and major cultural institutions all in close proximity.”²³ Keller’s primary interest lies in the study of the cities as cultural centers, that is, as spaces where people assimilate and transmit cultural values and worldviews. In an increasingly globalized world, cities have become more influential in shaping people’s thinking and habits than nation states.²⁴ As Keller observes, “New York and Los Angeles become far more influential in forming the culture of teenagers in rural Indiana or rural Mexico than the national or local governments.”²⁵ In order to minister to the unique array of “city-center inhabitants,” churches must learn about the “dominant worldviews” that shape their minds and hearts, including the shift from modern to postmodern thinking, while acknowledging the presence of a broader variety of worldviews encompassing traditional, modern, post-modern, and post-postmodern ways of thinking.²⁶ Keller aligns worldviews with cultural shifts, but also with generational differences and geographical areas. Although a plurality of worldviews inhabits the city (significantly, due to migrations), each can be generally identified with certain populations or generations and US geographical regions. For example, traditional worldview people, who find meaning in duty to family and doing the right thing within social structures, tend to come from the country’s “South and Midwestern regions,” and include “small town residents, blue collar employees, first-generation immigrants from non-Western countries, as well as people aged seventy or older.”²⁷

Learning these worldviews allows Christians to contextualize the gospel in a way that speaks to and challenges audiences, discerning how the culture’s narratives embody aspects of natural revelation and pushing back against those aspects that are antithetical to the Christian story. Each worldview offers a way to think about identity, meaning in life, major felt need, value, relationships, means of persuasion, and idols, which in turn recommends distinct implications for ministry contextualization. For instance, whereas “modern” city dwellers tend to be “rational thinkers” persuaded through logical argument and scientific proof, postmoderns tend to be “pragmatists” who are more interested in the power of stories (rather than evidence) and whether an idea “works and builds community.”²⁸ Having heard what modes of discourse persuade these neighbors, how then should the gospel speak into their cultures? For moderns who value individual freedom of thought but mistrust authority, preaching must address what freedom in Christ entails and challenge hearers to see how certain forms of “freedom” can enslave people to idols such as individualism and claims about the power of reason to solve everything.²⁹ For postmoderns who are attracted by practical values such as community-building and social justice, the church can affirm what is good about these concerns and also show how, according to the Christian story, “the gospel embraces the ‘other,’ those who are different from others.”³⁰

In his argument for gospel contextualization, Keller appeals to the apostle Paul's use of different rhetorical strategies for speaking to Greeks and Jews about the power of the cross. When dealing with the Greek "culture's idol of speculation and philosophy," he preached the countercultural "foolishness" of the cross; when dealing with the Jews' "idol of power and accomplishment," he proclaimed the "weakness" of the cross (see 1 Cor 1:22–25).³¹ Contextualization involves a dialogical process through which the church first listens to city dwellers within their own cultural frameworks, and then responds winsomely yet truthfully to them with the gospel in a way that it constructively accounts for their concerns and critically challenges any idolatrous trajectories. Such dialogical approach serves a missional purpose: "To reach a culture, the gospel must enter, challenge, and retell the stories of that culture."³² An impetus for this approach is "illustrated in Jeremiah's urban-centric prophetic mandate and in Paul's urban-centric missionary strategy," which calls the church to "seek the peace and

Keller appeals to the apostle Paul's use of different rhetorical strategies for speaking to Greeks and Jews about the power of the cross.

prosperity of the city" (Jer 29:7) and even "live in great numbers in cities—not despising them, accommodating to them, seeking control of them, or using them for career opportunities—but rather loving them and seeking their peace."³³ The city becomes a classroom where city dwellers and the church are both teachers and learners. Christians learn to love the city by loving to learn in and with the city, receiving and using its created gifts in ways that are conducive to everyday Christian

witness in word and life, while also respectfully rejecting that which does not preach the gospel. To illustrate such an evangelical appropriation of urban life, Keller advises the church to adopt the creative artistic streak and drive for excellence typical of young professionals in urban centers in the church's worship, preaching, and conversation.³⁴ In doing so, however, the church will also guard against an artistic aesthetic reduced to the visual to the detriment of the word of truth, or to a view of professional excellence that fosters a utilitarian work ethic without a sense of God-given vocation and responsibility. In Keller's dialogical model, the Christian story is not at the same level of or equal to other stories but remains the church's dominant theological narrative lens to discern and interpret the city.

The Eschatological Approach

An emeritus professor of Christian social ethics with a pastoral and academic background in Hispanic and urban theological education and ministry, Eldin

Villafañe has worked extensively in and written about the city, especially on the *barrios* (working neighborhoods). Inspired by the words of Jeremiah 29:4–7, “And seek the Peace [Shalom] of the city . . . and pray to the Lord for it; for in its Peace [Shalom] you will have Peace [Shalom],” Villafañe offers a “Jeremiah paradigm” for urban ministry that envisions the church’s formation in practices of “presence, peace, and prayer” in and for the sake of the city.³⁵ Presence aligns with a “theology of context” according to which the church neither assimilates into nor flees from the city, but engages and influences the city by attending to “human needs . . . be they physical, political, economic, or spiritual.”³⁶ Appealing to the broad semantic range of *shalom*, which includes “wholeness, soundness, completeness, health, harmony, reconciliation, justice, welfare—both personal and social,” the author calls the church to preach and embody a “theology of mission” in which she is “an instrument, a servant, of peace in the city.”³⁷ Finally, prayer calls the church to enact a “theology of spirituality” that equips city dwellers to survive and confront the violence brought by principalities and powers (understood as demonic powers working not only through individuals but also institutions) upon the poor and the outsider.³⁸ By embodying this presence, peace, and prayer life in the city, the church becomes a sign and instrument of God’s kingdom on earth—indeed, the church embodies a social ethic (or to borrow Hauerwas’ language, the church “is” a social ethic).

A proleptic sign of God’s kingdom on earth embodied by the Hispanic urban church in the *barrios* is its *mestizaje*, a term signifying the coming together of people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Given its creative integration of European, African, and Amerindian elements, Villafañe sees *salsa* music in particular as a generative urban metaphor of *mestizaje*.³⁹ Significantly, *salsa* music evokes a particular type of *mestizaje*, one that embraces *fiesta* (celebration), joy, and hope, and therefore, serves as a source of affirmation and strength for urban Hispanics facing discrimination, poverty, and other forms of marginality.⁴⁰ By the leading of the Holy Spirit, the Hispanic church learns already now to move in the *barrios* according to the rhythms of survival, signpost, and salvation. Each of these rhythms signify ways of living as church in the world in a way that the powers of the anti-kingdom are denounced and the powers of God’s reign in Christ are announced. For instance, in a world in which ethnic-

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racially mixed people experience attempts at “forced assimilation,” salsa in the key of “survival” affirms and celebrates the lives and cultures of marginal neighbors.⁴¹ Similarly, in a world where Latino churches are seen paternalistically as “a ‘foreign enclave,’ a possible ‘threat to the unity of the universal church’ or a ‘mission station,’” their very mestizaje embodies a “prophetic witness” to the whole church of their identity as church proper and highlights their role “*as a priestly community*” for the whole church that works for reconciliation among various ethnic groups.⁴² Finally, the very presence of Latino churches in struggling barrios points to the hope of salvation or liberation from sin in the here and now. The Hispanic church becomes a sign and servant of the kingdom that brings about shalom: “There one finds a gathering of God’s church, providing a community of freedom, dignity, self-worth, comfort, strength, hope, joy—abundant life!”⁴³

Although God’s kingdom or rule in Christ cannot be identified with the church, Villafañe sees the church as the preeminent sign and instrument of God’s reign in the world. As a particular expression of Christ’s church in a world plagued with indifference to the struggles of vulnerable neighbors and racial-ethnic divisions, the Hispanic/Latino church embodies in her mestizaje and salsa character the coming together of people of all ethnicities, tribes, and languages into the eschatological city, the New Jerusalem, where God’s shalom heals the city with an everlasting peace and joy. In Villafañe’s eschatological approach, the city, paradoxically, is a struggling barrio where people dance to the hopeful rhythms of salsa heard from streets and alleys, and the rooftops of apartment buildings. City dwellers are both hosts and guests in God’s *fiesta*. The church’s mission in the city consists in her proclamation and living of a kingdom ethic that witnesses to God’s shalom in Christ by denouncing sin and announcing hope.

Who Is the City? Toward a Neighbor-Oriented Approach

I started this essay noting that the city is not a what, but a who. So, *who* is the city? Souls in need of deliverance from bondage to the devil and the chaos he breeds in society? Responsible moral agents who cooperate with others toward sustainable development through exchanges of talents and assets? Receivers and communicators of cultural worldviews whom the church interacts with through critical dialogue about the Christian story? Prophetic signs and instruments of hope announcing the coming of God’s kingdom of peace and joy amidst the struggles of life? Each theological approach offers a window into the dynamics of the city as a *human* settlement. Each perspective functions as a partial diagnostic lens into the challenges and hopes of various neighbors in the city.

Understandably, on its own, no one approach can encompass everything there is to say about the city and the church’s mission in the city. Yet every approach can potentially contribute something important toward an urban anthropology and

ecclesiology. In some sense, the city is a battlefield, a marketplace, a classroom, and a fiesta in the barrio. The church's mission in the city is redemptive, relational, dialogical, and eschatological. The four approaches are tools that may describe the situation of some urban settings at particular points in time. They are illustrative of the kinds of issues raised in a theology of the city, such as the proper ways to think about its dwellers, the biblical narratives that illuminate and best speak to their struggles and aspirations, and the church's role and responsibilities in urban areas. Of course, there are potentially many other approaches to the city dealing with other neighbors and issues, such as perspectives from Catholics (including those informed by Catholic Social Teaching), Christians working from various justice frameworks, members of other ethnic groups such as African and Asian Americans, migrants within the nation and immigrants from other nations (including refugees, asylees, and other displaced people), and writers from cities outside the United States.

For pedagogical purposes, I have presented the theological approaches as discrete categories. But they can also share things in common. For example, all approaches offer perspectives from organic intellectuals, that is, from church leaders who reflect theologically on hands-on grassroots or local involvement in a diversity of US urban contexts. Moreover, all approaches share a similar commitment to holistic ministry, one in which gospel proclamation and works of mercy and justice go together. In real life, the concerns of all proposals can also interact with one another. This potential for cross-pollination of approaches is desirable given the complexity of life in the city. Harrison's redemptive approach in its own way can appropriate the relational aspect of diakonia as the church's embodiment of a mutually interdependent view of fellowship (*koinonia*) in which we share each other's joys and burdens. Lupton's relational focus on two-way partnerships has a certain affinity with Keller's dialogical approach to the city, which assumes the church's interest not only in sharing the Christian story with city dwellers but also in receiving their created gifts into the church. In its own way, the church's prophetic role in Villafañe's eschatological approach shares Harrison's interest in redeeming the city from its bondage to the powers of evil, as well as Keller's call to confront cultural idols that get in the way of the gospel. Other interactions among approaches are possible.

Because no one approach can account for getting all neighbors right, seeing things through only one approach could lead to generalizations about city dwellers and misunderstandings of the dynamics of life in the city. The redemptive approach can lead to a pessimistic view of the city as the realm of evil, an understanding of neighbors as helpless victims caught in battle, and thus a harsh and combative view of urban ministry. The relational approach tends to think of the city as a place where partnerships are valued, but its focus on individual responsibility can lose sight of larger systemic problems affecting communities. Moreover, the emphasis on the exchange of assets can lead to an overly commercialized view of human dignity and

relationships. The dialogical approach focuses so much on the contributions and idols of influential city-center people that it tends to leave out of the dialogue the problems and gifts of marginal city neighbors who also contribute to its vitality such as immigrants and blue-collar workers.⁴⁴ Conversely, in celebrating how God works prophetically from marginal places in the city, the eschatological approach can fall into a romantic view of the *barrios* as privileged places of hope.

Who then is the city? The usefulness of any approach to the city must be tested considering the needs and treasures, beliefs and idols, of concrete neighbors. Neighbors are both recipients of generosity and contributors/partners in ministry and service, both broken vessels in need of rehabilitation and healing vessels for the wellbeing of the community, and—most fundamentally—human creatures for whom Christ became incarnate, died, and rose again.⁴⁵

We must always put a human face on the city, neither demonizing nor romanticizing its inhabitants. Matthew Hale Smith, a nineteenth-century American minister and journalist, once remarked that “great cities must ever be centers of light and darkness, the home of the best and the worst of our race, holding within themselves the highest talent for good and evil.”⁴⁶ In an essay on cities and migration, Dale Irvin suggestively observes that cities

are not only places of pure joy and freedom, but also places of great suffering and oppression. . . . They amplify the *imago dei* in all of its ambiguities. They are places of great terror as well as great beauty. By their very logic they intensify the negative tendencies of human experience towards inequalities in wealth and power alongside the positive tendencies towards equality and compassion.⁴⁷

If the city ultimately refers us to a *who*, to its inhabitants and dwellers, then, the city reflects the image of God (*imago dei*) after the fall, both the good and the bad. Indeed, a history of the American city reveals that cities cannot be reduced to dens of iniquity, objects of fear and desire to be saved by religious leaders; they are also places of great religious faithfulness and fervor, especially due to the beliefs and practices migrants and immigrants have brought with them and adapted to their new homes, including Christians.⁴⁸

Like human nature, the city is a living paradox. A Lutheran anthropology can account for such a paradox. The city is at the same time created and corrupted, and the church in the city is at the same time righteous and sinful! (*Urbs simul creatura et corrupta est, et ecclesia in urbe simul iusta et peccatoria est!*) A Lutheran anthropology sees neighbors as God’s good creation yet corrupted by sin. Against the Manicheans, the Lutheran Confessions acknowledge that human nature, even after the fall, remains God’s good work.⁴⁹ We can thus affirm and thank God for displaying his first-article gifts in city neighbors, that is, for their creative, aesthetic, and ethical

impulses and works in society. Against the Pelagians, Lutherans also teach that human nature has been deeply corrupted by sin and is thus in need of redemption, sanctification, and glorification.⁵⁰ More important, Lutherans confess that the Son of God, by assuming our human nature into his own person, “redeemed human nature as his creation, sanctifies it as his creation, awakens it from the dead, and adorns it in glorious fashion as his creation.”⁵¹ We can thus approach the city with the eyes of

Christ’s compassion, entering into solidarity with our neighbors as our Lord himself has done for us in his life and mission. Considering Christ’s great love for humanity, a neighbor-oriented approach to the city cannot ultimately paint the city as a burden. The neighbor is not ultimately a problem, but God’s gift to us.

Finally, given the church’s presence and activity in the city today, we are especially thankful to our Father in heaven for the ways in which he sanctifies his people in cities here and abroad. By his Holy Spirit, God graciously conforms his people to his Son as instruments of his reconciliation, deliverance from evil, sacrificial service, hospitality to strangers, and devoted life of working and praying for the city’s healing and flourishing.⁵² By 2050 about 70 percent of the world’s population is projected to live in cities across the globe.⁵³ The city is not only becoming the church’s most obvious mission field, but also the most visible expression of the church catholic proper and the launching pad for mission to the world in its own right.

Considering Christ’s great love for humanity, a neighbor-oriented approach to the city cannot ultimately paint the city as a burden. The neighbor is not ultimately a problem, but God’s gift to us.

Endnotes

- 1 By focusing on theological anthropology, I do not mean to minimize how cities can function structurally to reflect the cosmologies, worldviews, problems, values, and aspirations of their dwellers at different times in history. For further reading on these aspects, see Robert A. Orsi, *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Dale T. Irvin, “Migrations and Cities: Theological Reflections,” in Elaine Padilla and Peter C. Phan, eds., *Contemporary Issues of Migration and Theology* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 73–93; and Lewis H. Lapham, “City Light,” Preamble to “The City,” *Lapham’s Quarterly*, 3, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 13–19.
- 2 Matthew C. Harrison, *Theological Reflections on Confessional Lutheran Involvement in Neighborhood Renewal: An Exercise in Two-Kingdom Theology* [hereafter *Neighborhood Renewal*] (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2006; reprint 2019), 8.
- 3 Harrison, *Neighborhood Renewal*, 10–11. See also Matthew C. Harrison, *The Church’s Role of Mercy in the Community* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2004; reprint 2019).
- 4 Harrison, *Neighborhood Renewal*, 3, 15–16.
- 5 Harrison, *Neighborhood Renewal*, 12. Harrison cites Luther’s explanation of the petition “deliver us from evil” in the Lord’s Prayer: “. . . this petition . . . includes all the evil that may befall us under the devil’s kingdom: poverty, shame, death and, in short, all the tragic misery and heartache of which there is so incalculably much on earth. Since the devil is not only a liar but also a murderer, he constantly seeks out life and vents his anger by causing accidents and injury to our bodies. He breaks many a man’s neck and drives others to insanity; some he drowns, and many he hounds to suicide or other dreadful catastrophes. Therefore there is nothing for us to do on earth but to pray constantly against this arch-enemy. For if God did not support us, we would not be safe from him for a single hour” (LC. Lord’s Prayer, 115).”
- 6 Harrison, *Neighborhood Renewal*, 19.
- 7 Harrison, *Neighborhood Renewal*, 17–20.
- 8 Harrison, *Neighborhood Renewal*, 14.
- 9 Harrison, *Neighborhood Renewal*, 8. Harrison cites the Apology to the Augsburg Confession: “We feel the same way about every work done in the most humble occupation and in private life. Through these works Christ shows his victory over the devil, just as the distribution of alms by the Corinthians was a holy work (1 Cor 16:1) [and also a corporate work of mercy in Corinthians! M. H.], a sacrifice, and a battle of Christ against the devil, who is determined that nothing happen to the praise of God. To disparage works like the confession of doctrine, afflictions, works of charity [*officia caritatis*], and the mortification of the flesh would be to disparage the outward administration of Christ’s rule among men’ (Ap. IV.192f).” *Neighborhood Renewal*, 10.
- 10 See Robert D. Lupton, *Toxic Charity: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)* (New York: HarperOne, 2011); and Steve Corbett and Brian Fikkert, *When Helping Hurts: How to Alleviate Poverty Without Hurting the Poor . . . and Yourself*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2012).
- 11 Lupton, *Toxic Charity*, 35.
- 12 Robert D. Lupton, *Compassion, Justice, and the Christian Life: Rethinking Ministry to the Poor* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007), 39.
- 13 Lupton, *Compassion, Justice, and the Christian Life*, 52–53.
- 14 Lupton, *Compassion, Justice, and the Christian Life*, 8–9.
- 15 Lupton, *Compassion, Justice, and the Christian Life*, 42.
- 16 Lupton, *Compassion, Justice, and the Christian Life*, 43–44.
- 17 Lupton, *Compassion, Justice, and the Christian Life*, 44.
- 18 Lupton, *Compassion, Justice, and the Christian Life*, 51.
- 19 Lupton, *Compassion, Justice, and the Christian Life*, 22; “Perhaps the best giving is the kind that enables the poor to know the blessedness of being givers” (55).
- 20 See Lupton, *Compassion, Justice, and the Christian Life*, 71–73.

- 21 Lupton fears that even the language of service or being a servant can be co-opted to advance toxic charity. Citing John 15:15, the author prefers to move from servant to friend language when defining mutual exchanges. See *Compassion, Justice, and the Christian Life*, 65–67.
- 22 Lupton's views reflect the move in development toward asset-based partnerships. See Corbett and Fikkert, *When Helping*, 119–22.
- 23 Timothy Keller, "Our New Global Culture: Ministry in Urban Centers" (New York: Redeemer City to City, 2005), 1.
- 24 Significantly, recent research on immigration suggests that it is the city instead of the nation state that should function as the driving paradigm for dealing with questions about immigrants, such as their participation in the political process. See Avner de Shalit, *Cities and Immigration: Political and Moral Dilemmas in the New Era of Migration* (New York: Oxford, 2018).
- 25 Keller, "Our New Global Culture," 1.
- 26 Keller, "Our New Global Culture," 2.
- 27 Keller, "Our New Global Culture," 3.
- 28 Keller, "Our New Global Culture," 3–4.
- 29 Keller, "Our New Global Culture," 3–4.
- 30 Keller, "Our New Global Culture," 4.
- 31 Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 44. For Keller's full treatment of contextualization, see *Center Church*, 84–134.
- 32 Keller, "Our New Global Culture," 19.
- 33 Keller, "Our New Global Culture," 19.
- 34 "The city center embodies a culture of expertise. People who work in city centers are usually highly educated, highly skilled overachievers . . . Artistic quality is very important. Amateurish art and music will not go over well, especially with the high percentage of city residents who are themselves artists. . . . Discipleship must demonstrate how to be distinctively Christian within one's job, including how to handle peculiar temptations and ethical quandaries, how to produce work from a distinctly Christian worldview, and how to help other Christians in the industry do their work excellently." Keller, "Our New Global Culture," 5 (cf. 10–11, 16).
- 35 Eldin Villafaña, "The Jeremiah Paradigm for the City," *Christianity and Crisis* (November 16, 1992): 374. The article was reprinted as the introduction to Eldin Villafaña, *Seek the Peace of the City: Reflections on Urban Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 1–3.
- 36 Villafaña, "The Jeremiah Paradigm for the City," 374.
- 37 Villafaña, "The Jeremiah Paradigm for the City," 375.
- 38 Villafaña, "The Jeremiah Paradigm for the City," 375.
- 39 Eldin Villafaña, *A Prayer for the City: Further Reflections on Urban Ministry* (Austin, TX: AETH, 2001), 35–36.
- 40 Villafaña, *A Prayer for the City*, 44–45.
- 41 Villafaña, *A Prayer for the City*, 45–46.
- 42 Villafaña, *A Prayer for the City*, 46–47.
- 43 Villafaña, *A Prayer for the City*, 48.
- 44 Shalit notes that 50 percent of immigrants to the United States end up settling in only five cities, and 54 percent of the world's population live in cities. See Shalit, *Cities and Immigration*, 3, 9.
- 45 For a neighbor-oriented approach to justice, see Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., "The Human Face of Justice: Reclaiming the Neighbor in Law, Vocation, and Justice Talk," *Concordia Journal* 39, no. 2 (2013): 117–32.
- 46 Cited in "The City," *Lapham's Quarterly*, 3, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 78.
- 47 Dale T. Irvin, "The Church, Migration and Global (In)Difference: They End in the City," in Darren J. Dias, Jaroslav Z. Skira, Michael S. Attridge, and Gerard Mannion, eds., *The Church, Migration, and Global (In)Difference* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 13–14.

- 48 Robert A. Orsi, "Introduction: Crossing the City Line," in *Gods of the City*, 1–78. Nor is the city merely a space of "secularity" devoid of religion, but also a place of spiritual revival where the return to the sacred is evident. Harvey Cox's own work on the city reflects this shift in outlook. Compare Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), and his subsequent works *Religion in the Secular City: Toward A Postmodern Theology* (New York: Touchstone, 1984), and *Fire from Heaven: The Rise of Pentecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1995).
- 49 "For God created not only the body and soul of Adam and Eve before the fall but also our body and soul after the fall, even though they are corrupted. God also still recognizes them as his own work, as it is written, Job 10[8*], 'Your hands fashioned and made me, together all around.'" KW, FC, Epit. I, 4; "We also reject and condemn as a Manichean error when it is taught that original sin is really, without any distinction, the very substance, nature, and essence of the corrupted human being, and thus that there should be no suggestion of a difference between human nature after the fall in and of itself and original sin, nor should they be differentiated from each other in our thinking." KW, FC, Epit., I, 19.
- 50 "Likewise, we also reject the Pelagian error, which asserts that even after the fall human nature has remained uncorrupted and especially in spiritual matters remains completely good and pure in its *naturalia*, that is, in its natural powers." KW, FC, Epit., I, 13.
- 51 KW, FC, Epit., I, 6.
- 52 On five ways in which the Spirit of Christ sanctifies God's people, see Leopoldo A. Sánchez M., *Sculptor Spirit: Models of Sanctification from Spirit Christology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).
- 53 Irvin, "The Church, Migration and Global (In)Difference," 8.

Christ in the City Proclaiming the Gospel, Advocating for Justice, and Instilling Hope

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Learn The City. Learn the language of its people, its secular means of communication, the flicker of eyes, the gesture of hands, the postures of contempt, servility, pride, protection, love . . . learn to read what hurts are real and what their symptoms

are. Discover first the human dramas already being enacted in The City before your arrival—for the Holy Spirit is ahead of you. . . . Earn your right to be heard by The City. This is not bequeathed you . . . it comes when you—to your own sacrifice—commit your ways to the people of The City; and they shall believe that commitment only over a period of time.

Walter Wangerin Jr. Ragman: *And Other Cries of Faith*¹

Cities matter. As the city goes, so goes the entire culture of the arts, scholarship, communication, philosophy, and commerce.² From the tall church steeple to the basement food pantry, Christian churches have left an indelible mark on cities across the United States. From the mid-twentieth century to the present, hundreds, if not thousands, of congregations, faith-based organizations, and religious communities have reinvigorated America's urban areas. Christian congregations have thoughtfully and intentionally adapted to the changing urban context throughout the last several decades. To be sure, there have been conflicts

and struggles, but Christianity in American cities has shown itself to be strong and durable.³ Many congregations and individual Christians have enacted the advice of Lutheran pastor and author Walter Wangerin Jr. to learn the language of the people in the city while also earning the right to be heard in the city.⁴

As an urban pastor, professor, and American religious historian, Walter Wangerin's advice has been a valuable guide for me in my ministry. Too often, conversations about urban ministry and racial justice in the United States fail to take seriously the lived experiences of the people in the city.⁵ For instance, in *Toxic Charities: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)*, Robert Lupton analyzes the unintentional ways church charities, food pantries, and similar social agencies fail to empower and equip people in need.⁶ As Lupton and Wangerin both demonstrate, Christians must evaluate what they do well in the city, but also what they need to do differently. To effectively serve in the city, Christians must show their long-term commitment to the city by forming relationships with people living, working, and serving in the city. By first learning the language of the people and then earning the right to be heard, Christians have the opportunity—led by the Spirit—to proclaim the gospel, advocate for justice, and instill hope for generations of people living in and around cities.

Taking my cue from Walter Wangerin, I argue in this essay that Lutherans need to prioritize earning the right to be heard by the city. To that end, I outline three steps for engaging the city that supports the church in its central task of proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ to all people (Mt 28:16–20, Acts 1:8). First, we need to know the history of cities in America. Second, we need to know the pressing issues confronting cities in America, particularly racism which continues to be overlooked and misunderstood by some conservative Christians. Third, we need to know the history of urban congregations in The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, especially those that have faithfully proclaimed the gospel and effectively ministered to those in their local communities. In this essay, First Immanuel Lutheran Church in Chicago serves as a paradigm for a Christ-centered LCMS congregation engaged with its local, urban community.⁷ Finally, once we have earned the right to be heard, we are called to speak the good news of Jesus to the many and diverse people of the city. Through this process of learning, listening, and loving, Lutheran congregations will be beacons of hope—pointing to Christ as “the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6).

Know the History of Cities in America

Understanding life, ministry, and mission in the city calls for the capacity to analyze and interpret the historical and present-day challenges and opportunities of urban ministry with biblical and theological depth.⁸ Historian Tom Sugrue observes in *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, “American cities have long reflected the hopes as well as the failures of the society at large . . . Coming to grips with that history is not a mere

academic exercise . . . To come to grips with the problems and promises of our cities, we must grapple with the past as a means to engaging with the present.”⁹ Over the last few decades, scholars have analyzed the city and offered penetrating insights on the paradoxical images of creativity and dysfunction, development and poverty, growth and decline that are all present in today’s cities.¹⁰ By gaining a clearer understanding of the history of American cities, Christians will be better

equipped to engage the social, political, and cultural context of America’s sprawling cities. Moreover, it will become clear how much urbanization has shaped the religious lives and patterns in urban, suburban, and even rural congregations across the country.

The history of the modern, industrial American city solidified in the years between 1885 and 1914. During this time, the United States experienced unprecedented growth in population, economic production, and urbanization. Major historical innovations in American society—such as the rise of manufacturing, cheap and rapid transportation, and the commercialization of agriculture—contributed to the tremendous population growth of American industrial cities. In addition, massive immigration to the United States from abroad and the significant migration of individuals *within* the United States led to the growth of many American cities. US historians commonly refer to this period as the Gilded Age (1870s–1900) and Progressive Era (1897–1917). It was an era marked by disruption, hardship, and social and economic change, yet also progress, innovation, and opportunity. American social, religious, and cultural values were shaped by modernization, improved education, increased opportunities for women, and leisure. At the same time, there were many social consequences to industrialization and urbanization: disparities between rich and poor; competing interests that pitted urban and rural communities against each other; progressive reform that searched for individual values; and increased sectional differences as regions of the United States, namely the Northeast, South, and West, specialized in different forms of economic production. In *The Response to Industrialism, 1885–1914*, historian Samuel Hays shows how Americans of all classes reacted to the innovations of the new urban order and the social and economic pressures brought about by immigration, industrialization, and urbanization.¹¹ Hays describes the interconnectedness of corporate businesses, mass markets, and mass production vying for power and wealth. In response to this interconnected industrial capitalism, Hays notes the success of reform efforts and labor-led activism as individuals of all classes acted on their religious and ideological principles to bring about a more equitable and just society.¹²

Massive immigration to the United States from abroad and the significant migration of individuals within the United States led to the growth of many American cities.

During this same period of urbanization from 1885 to 1914, Protestant and Catholic churches were on the rise in America's cities. In both large and small cities across America, Christian churches and schools dotted the urban landscape and conveyed how the religious lives of everyday people (many who were newly arrived immigrants) were structured around a local neighborhood with a church at the center of the block. Even today, most city streets contain several massive stone or brick churches that provide a visual reminder of the institutional success of many Protestant and Catholic congregations at the turn of the twentieth century. In addition to the shared religious identity of these communities, many urban neighborhoods had a shared ethnic history and heritage. Take, for instance, First Immanuel Lutheran Church, one of the oldest Lutheran congregations in Chicago. It was founded in 1854 by German immigrants and by the late 1800s, First Immanuel consisted of over three thousand members. Many of these members walked a mere few blocks to the church on Sunday morning demonstrating the close tie this church had with its surrounding neighborhood. Similar examples abound of Protestant and Catholic churches with soaring memberships in the middle of urban areas.

However, the institutional strength of churches in the city did not last. Urban growth (as well as growth in church membership) was stifled and stagnant during the Great Depression and the World Wars. The industrial city was aging and showed signs of disrepair as urban infrastructure strained under the demands of so many people in dense urban areas.

The most decisive turning point for urban Christian congregations was what

The institutional strength of churches in the city did not last.

happened after World War II. During this postwar period, Protestant and Catholic churches were swept up in a variety of competing forces: deindustrialization, suburban sprawl, and rapid migration in and out of the city. In response to the religious and

urban crisis they faced mid-century, Protestant and Catholic churches adapted to the changing demographics and circumstances of the city. For instance, in the late 1940s in Chicago, urban neighborhoods and their churches were beset with challenges due to disinvestment and rapid migration. In Chicago neighborhoods, many whites were exiting the city while African Americans and Latinos/as were moving into the neighborhoods left behind. As a result, the churches in these neighborhoods were caught in a context of tremendous urban change.

This pattern of rapid change, disinvestment, and population flux was experienced in cities across the United States, especially in cities in the North and Midwest. Due to these persistent changes, many churches experienced membership decline, rising costs in building maintenance, and pressures from the socio-economic, political, and cultural

forces reshaping American cities. As cars became more affordable, many churches were moved away from their urban neighborhoods. This further accelerated an era dominated by rapid change as droves of people left the city for the suburbs, while many other people (including many African Americans) flowed *into* the partially defunct urban neighborhoods left behind.

The mid-twentieth century marked a turning point for Protestant and Catholic congregations—institutional success was no longer guaranteed. Instead, they would have to work, often with other religious, nonprofit, and secular groups, to achieve institutional sustainability. The postwar era was a pivotal moment for American Protestants and Catholics who, largely for the first time, had to prove the relevancy of their message and purpose. Instead of relying on a shared ethnic and denominational identity for reaching new members, American Protestants and Catholics needed to reach a much more diverse group of people in US cities. Since this defining period, Protestants and Catholics (and essentially all religious groups in the United States) have had to communicate their value in the spiritual marketplace. The consequences of this cultural and religious shift have only intensified in recent decades as America has become even more individualistic and consumer-driven in its approach toward religion.¹³

Today, Christian churches and institutions continue to fight for relevance in American cities. Many religious mainstays in urban neighborhoods are drawing on their congregational histories to support their commitment to urban populations. At the same time, many white, suburban Protestant congregations are planting churches in America's urban core to reach people in gentrifying neighborhoods. Still others, mainly Christian immigrants from Asia, Africa, and South America, are starting their own congregations in America's urban core.

Know the Issues Confronting Cities in America

In addition to understanding American urban history, Christians need to know the key issues confronting cities in America to compassionately serve, evangelize, and minister to urban populations. There are two main factors that underly much of the social, political, and economic tension in metropolitan areas today: urban, suburban, and rural social divisions and the intractable problem of racism in America.

Urban, Suburban, and Rural Divides

One of the chief causes of mistrust among Americans, including mistrust among

Since this defining period, Protestants and Catholics have had to communicate their value in the spiritual marketplace.

many Christians in America, is the deep division between urban, suburban, and rural communities. Many of the social and political debates about poverty, homelessness, crime, policing, racial injustice, public schools, and affordable housing are exacerbated by the entrenched perspectives of people in large part due to their proximity, assumptions, and experiences of the city.¹⁴

The relationship between religion and the city is a topic of ongoing discussion by mainstream media and scholars.¹⁵ Alex Wagner (contributing editor to *Radio Atlantic* and CBS anchor) and Emma Green (a journalist at *The Atlantic* covering religion and politics) evaluated the future of religion in America and gave special consideration to the urban, suburban, and rural divides on religion and politics in the United States. They both stress the ongoing developments, changes, and pressures faith communities experience in today's metropolitan regions. Wagner asked, "Do Americans in big cities have to navigate the question of faith in the same way that people in rural and suburban America do? Do they grapple with it in the same way? Does it have the same meaning?" Green responded, "I think the urban/rural divide is the single most overlooked fracture in American religion, particularly in the American church. . . . Because Christianity is so huge and spread out, there are radically different orientations for those people who are in cities and those people who are in suburbs and rural country."¹⁶ Based on the observations of these journalists, more study is needed on the relationship between the way in which rural, suburban, and urban areas structure faith. Lutherans should be cognizant of how our lived experiences in cities, suburbs, and rural communities shape expectations on the value, role, and purpose of religion.

Lutherans should also be intentional in evaluating how their lived experiences in America's rural, suburban, and urban communities shape their perspective of the city. For instance, Christians should be wary of equating the term "urban" with "inner city." This equation seems especially pronounced by people in suburban and rural churches who often associate urban ministry with service trips, homeless shelters, and food pantries located in distressed urban areas. More problematic are the assumptions, prejudices, and biases intensified by late evening news programs, social media, and Twitter about the people living in these distressed communities. For thoughtful and effective engagement with the city, Christians must be honest about how their own individual perspectives and experiences of the city enhance, but also distort, their view of the city. At times, this might lead Christians to repent for past wrongs, especially where sins of commission or omission have been made. The purpose of confession and absolution is to not obsess about our past failures; instead, Christians are called to go forth forgiven and free on account of Christ's righteousness (1 Jn 1:8). When applied to the city, confession and absolution prepares Christians to better engage the diverse people of the city.

One solution to the urban, suburban, and rural divides in America is for Christians to have a broader and deeper understanding of metropolitan regions, which often include numerous suburbs, exurbs, and sometimes even rural communities as parts of the whole. Large metropolitan regions in the United States like New York-Newark-Jersey City (19 million residents), Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim (13 million residents), Chicago-Naperville-Elgin (9.5 million residents), and Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington (7.5 million residents) define what it means to be urban in the twenty-first century.¹⁷ The United States is far more urban—far more metropolitan—than we might surmise. Each of these metropolitan regions exerts tremendous influence throughout their region and across the nation. Instead of describing metropolitan regions as rural, suburban, or urban, a metropolitan approach emphasizes the economic, cultural, and commuting connections across these categories. Given that LCMS circuits and districts are typically structured around a shared geography, Lutheran pastors, commissioned ministers, and congregations can model for the wider culture what it looks like to work together across a shared geography that incorporates rural, suburban, and urban areas.

Racism

A second underlying cause of many urban social and economic problems is the persistence of racism in America, especially in its more subtle forms. Racism—and polemical debates in America on the topic of racism—exacerbates the discord, distrust, and agitation many Americans have toward each other. At times, conservative white Christians who often do not have firsthand experience with racism ignore or dismiss the concerns of fellow Christians who are black, indigenous, or people of color.¹⁸ In “Racism and the Church: Overcoming the Idolatry,” the Commission on Theology and Church Relations provides a penetrating look at racism in America and gives insight on how Christians can ameliorate racial injustice. The report states, “Because racism is so much a part of the American worldview, it is often difficult for us to recognize it when we see it. We become insensitive to expressions of it.”¹⁹ Instead of ignoring or minimizing the concerns of black, indigenous, and people of color, Christians are called to learn about, listen to, and serve the needs of their neighbors. The CTCR report concludes, “The church, aware of [the] history [of racism] in the United States, must continually employ methods—grounded in the Word and sacraments and in the proper distinction between Law and Gospel—to expose, condemn, and remove it. Not to do so is to participate in perpetuating institutional and cultural racism and to hinder effective and God-pleasing outreach with the Gospel.”²⁰

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The progress toward racial and economic equality in America has, like religion, had its high and low points. Has there been racial progress in the last fifty, sixty years? Most certainly, yes. But America is far from finished in its pursuit of racial equality in America. Over the last few years, news stories have covered police-involved shootings and deaths of African Americans in Ferguson, New York City, Cleveland, Baltimore, Chicago, and Minneapolis-St. Paul, among others. These police-involved shootings and deaths have brought racism, racial inequality, and policing practices to the forefront of American discourse. Numerous polls have shown how divided the nation is on matters of racial justice and equality. According to a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute, the vast majority of African Americans and black Christians believe police-involved killings are part of a larger racial problem in America. Meanwhile, many white Americans and white Christians think the issue of race is receiving too much press and the deaths of people of color by police are isolated incidents.²¹ How can the church effectively minister in an urban setting when it disregards a fundamental concern of so many people?²² Much can and needs to be said, but one point seems painfully obvious: US cities today remain plagued by racial segregation, division, and injustice.

Many urban historians and scholars have written extensively on racial segregation and its numerous and detrimental consequences to American lives, particularly among those who have black or brown skin color.²³ Urban historian Colin Gordon shows in his book, *Mapping Decline*, how racial inequalities emerged in St. Louis, especially how population trends, housing patterns, suburbanization, and the creation of the so-called inner city were shaped by racial restrictions.²⁴ Many urban scholars, like Arnold Hirsch and Thomas Sugrue, discover similar, long-standing patterns of racial segregation across American's cities, particularly those cities in the urban north and Midwest.²⁵ For instance, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, and Minneapolis-St. Paul—like many American cities—are heavily divided by race, with unequal access to education, jobs, and even grocery stores in neighborhoods that are predominantly African American or consisting of other persons of color. Make no mistake about it, racial segregation remains a critical—and seemingly intractable—problem.

Racial injustice, violence, and civil unrest are formidable challenges compounded by the deep polarization in American politics. Christians have also been taken up in this political polarization. Christians act with deep-seated suspicion toward other Christians who believe, act, and vote differently. “Urban crisis”—a term widely used in the 1960s to describe the vast urban problems in America's cities—still applies today to describe how residential and school segregation, racism, and other urban terms like deindustrialization, ghettoization, white flight, violence, and urban unrest continue to impact America's cities. As the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and too many others illustrate, today's urban crisis has very real consequences for American citizens and urban populations.

Shaped by the gospel and called by the Spirit, Christians are free in Christ to serve their neighbor, and, among other things, can and should pursue racial justice in the United States.²⁶ This is no easy task. The individual and social sins of racism are rooted in human nature and human psychology and amplified by our current state of politics and the media. As Lutherans, we cannot look the other way. In the LCMS Black Clergy Caucus Statement on George Floyd, Rev. Warren Lattimore Jr. compels Lutherans to compassionate, Christian action, “If we have the opportunity to prevent more lives from being lost, let us seize it.”²⁷

For Christians, justice must always be grounded in the law of God. The law of God says that we must love our neighbor.²⁸ When a lawyer interrupts Jesus and asks, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life,” the response of Jesus directs the man back to the law of God. Jesus asks him, “What is written in the law? How do you read it?” The lawyer answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” To this, Jesus instructs the lawyer, “Do this and you will live.” Justice is God’s law in action. The glaring problem is that no one obeys the law perfectly, and most people obey the law to a very mediocre degree. It should not surprise Christians, then, that there is such a profound need for justice in the world today. As long as people do not obey the law of God, there will be a need for faithful Christians to challenge the injustice present in the world today, including the injustice and inequities in US cities, metropolitan regions, and across the nation.

For me, confronting racism is a pastoral concern that emerged from my experiences, conversations, and pastoral care to both black and white families in St. Louis in the aftermath of Michael Brown’s 2014 death in Ferguson, Missouri. The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020, revealed the need for pastoral care and leadership in yet another crisis.²⁹ As the racially and ethnically diverse students in my theology courses at Concordia University, St. Paul have stressed to me, the church must do more to listen, understand, and stand with those suffering injustices—especially racial injustices.

I maintain that Lutherans have the potential to be some of the best advocates for justice because Lutherans have a clear understanding of law and gospel, recognize that baptized Christians live as *simul justus et peccator*, and believe that salvation is

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based not on works but on the righteousness of Jesus. Given the clarity of Lutheran theology and freedom Christians receive in Jesus, Lutherans are well-equipped to advocate for justice, while also faithfully proclaiming the gospel of Jesus.

A distinctly Lutheran response to today's urban and racial crisis must always keep the focus on the gospel, namely the complete reconciliation received in Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:18). At the same time, the church must empower and equip Christians to serve their neighbor by showing empathy, concern, and support when injustices take place.³⁰ Christians do this because they are Christ's ambassadors (2 Cor 5:20). In addition to the Christian scriptures, which exhort people to act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before God (Mi 6:8), Martin Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian* provides an instructive model for pursuing justice as a Christian: I am free in Christ to serve my neighbor. Consequently, calls for justice must always be done in service to one's neighbor (and not merely to advance a political ideology or platform).

Know the History of LCMS Churches in the City

Throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century, LCMS congregations have been a consistent witness of Christ's love for the city despite numerous challenges. The diversity, density, and prominence of cities means that urban ministry is an essential place for Christians to proclaim the gospel. Moreover, the city offers a tremendous opportunity for Christians to love, serve, and welcome people. Even though the size and number of LCMS churches in cities has decreased over the decades, there remain many faithful Lutheran congregations serving their local neighborhoods in today's metropolitan context.³¹

Congregations often reflect the religious lives of urban people and their communities. Urban churches have the greatest success when they connect Christian faith and congregational practice with the lived experience of urban populations.³² Churches accomplish this connectivity between Christian faith and city living when they respond to the needs of *all* the people in the neighborhood. Even more crucial, the public witness of the Christian church in the city must not be limited to charity and social justice but always be clear and faithful in its proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ.³³

It is striking how current political debates about racism, police tactics, and racial stereotyping, particularly of African American men, mimic the debates in America in the 1950s and 1960s. However, there are encouraging lessons to be learned from the 1950s and 1960s by turning to our own Lutheran congregations and their pastors who positioned themselves as compassionate and responsible voices during the civil rights movement. In 1953, First Immanuel Lutheran Church in Chicago was one of the first LCMS congregations in the nation to racially integrate its worship services. In the 1950s and 1960s, the members and clergy of First Immanuel took to the streets and advocated for fair and equal housing in the city, engaged with African

Americans and Mexican Americans living near the church, and even hosted Martin Luther King Jr. at a rally during his 1966 visit to Chicago.³⁴ By the 1970s and 1980s, the congregation consisted mostly of African American Lutherans who have maintained the vitality of the congregation to this day.

In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, First Immanuel's pastor, the Rev. Don Becker, and his wife, Deaconess Carolyn Becker, worked with the local neighborhood leaders and community organizations to pursue racial justice, equity, and reconciliation. Don and Carolyn were driven by a desire to be a socially engaged, Christ-centered congregation. In his essay, "Reflections on Race and the Church Today," Don Becker outlined five points to guide Lutheran congregations in their response to racial injustice and urban upheaval.³⁵ This essay was written in response to the 1965 riot in Chicago which started after a racial incident by police erupted two blocks away from First Immanuel Lutheran Church. The parallels between events in 1965 with civil disturbances and riots in recent years should serve as a warning about the pervasiveness of human sin, especially when it is infused with racism, discrimination, and hatred.

First, the gospel entails a public witness to local communities. Becker explained, the gospel "must be the church's guiding principle, its reason for existence. But if we are concerned with affecting and changing patterns which hurt people, then we have to recognize that this will involve us [in the community]."³⁶

Second, Christians must avoid taking the easy way out. Becker observed, "We think we are wise to be 'keeping out of the mess.' We think that we have stayed pure by avoiding a decision. Whereas the truth may be that our very decision to keep ourselves aloof from a social problem may have been a wrong and evil decision."³⁷

Third, Lutheran congregations must be advocates for racial equality. Becker explained, "Lutherans have a habit, when it comes to social goals such as equality for a minority group, to wish, hope, and pray for the goal—but not get involved personally in the struggle."³⁸ As the members of First Immanuel Lutheran demonstrated, a congregation could build tremendous trust with the people living in their communities when church members showed up to support them in real, tangible ways. Becker summarized,

The point of it all is that we simply can no longer avoid being involved in social issues. They are with us to stay. We must dig into the uncertainty of the moral issues involved, we must risk being associated with unworthy motives, we must dare to be accused of using improper methods. We must do it all because to do nothing may be the greatest sin of all.³⁹

Fourth, we need to put our trust in God so that our motivation for the well-being of our neighbor stays grounded in Jesus Christ. Becker explained, "As we join others in the community working toward desirable social ends, we have to keep our

feet firmly on the ground. Our eyes must always be open so that we can use every opportunity to let the world know that we act, not in the name of some nebulous good, but in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁴⁰

Incidents as complex and intense as violent racial injustice pull back the veil that too easily hides human suffering. Yet, in these moments when we are convicted of our own complicity in sin or when our hearts break over the loss of human life and the hurt and the pain experienced by so many—it moves us to turn to the one, sure, and certain hope that we have in Jesus Christ. As Paul writes, “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . And we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:1–5).

By heeding Rev. Lattimore’s call to action and utilizing Rev. Becker’s principles for faithful, biblical action, Lutherans have an opportunity to proclaim the gospel *and*, at the same time, convey an intentional Christian witness that values all human lives, repents of complicity in racial injustice, and ardently works for justice, reconciliation, and peace.

Proclaim the Gospel in the City

What do these reflections on American cities from the vantage point of urban and religious history mean for us today? In Acts, Jesus calls Saul on the road to Damascus to go into the city in preparation for the beginning of his ministry. Through the centuries, God has continued to call his church to enter cities to prepare for and engage in mission, ministry, and works of mercy and justice among neighbors of all nations. “Rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do” (Acts 9:6).⁴¹ The ministry of the early Christians was remarkably city centric.⁴² When Paul planted churches, he traveled to the largest city of that region to teach and preach the gospel. As the churches grew in these urban areas, more and more people were able to experience the gospel message because it spread from the urban center to the surrounding countryside. A similar dynamic is taking place today. By proclaiming the gospel in urban and metropolitan areas, Christians have an opportunity to engage and shape the wider culture and proclaim the gospel to people from all over the world.

A distinctly Lutheran theology of the city embodies the lived experience of God’s grace reaching and renewing all people. This is what it means to do all things in the context of the Christian gospel. Those who minister to people in America’s cities—especially those in distressed urban neighborhoods—know well the immense struggles. It’s not just problems and challenges that are “out there,” but the real pains, losses, and hurts church members and community members bring with them when they

come to worship, Bible study, a food pantry, or homeless shelter. Lutheran congregations in the city, suburbs, exurbs, and throughout metropolitan regions must minister and care for *all* people as created and loved by God.

The ministry of the early Christians was remarkably city centric.

People look for salvation from the problems of the world in lots of places, and certainly there are numerous solutions to the laundry list of human needs. The Christian gospel—the radical grace and love of God in Christ Jesus—is an authentic, tangible experience of the in-breaking of God amid the chaos of human life. Led by the gospel, Lutheran churches can build up resiliency, tenacity, and courage among their congregants. By addressing the problems of the world straight on, Lutheran congregations are called to display the compassionate love of God, welcome people into Christian communities, and demonstrate a deep and abiding hope by trusting in the salvific work of Jesus Christ. Through public prayer, preaching, and teaching God’s word, properly distinguishing law and gospel, baptizing, communing, and providing pastoral care that acknowledges the real challenges and sin of racism, Lutheran congregations demonstrate a Christian commitment to the people living in the city. By being the church in the city, Christians point to God’s work of redemption, reconciliation, and restoration in Jesus. For Christians, the work of service, sacrifice, advocacy, and solidarity emerges from the central conviction that there exists an omnipotent and loving God who is reconciling the world in Jesus. As Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth, “All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (1 Cor 5:18–21).

When Christians see their neighbors and earn the credibility to speak, they will have a profound opportunity to speak God’s word of hope. Serving and ministering in American cities and metropolitan areas provides opportunities for Christians to inspire and motivate people to see and live in a new, more just, more equitable future. From the perspective of faith, the enduring hope for Christians is not in a congregation’s accomplishments or in the success of a charity or social reform in the city. Certainly, community service and activism matter, and congregations must proactively engage in the public square to attract the attention of urban populations. Yet, the lives of faithful people call attention to a deeper, more durable, transcendent reality. God dwells with his people—wherever they reside, whatever their struggle. As America’s cities rise in population and density and as existing and new social problems emerge in these places, Lutheran congregations would do well to invest in their local neighborhoods—urban, suburban, and rural—to proclaim the gospel, to create welcoming communities of faith, and to give prophetic voice to social issues and inequalities.

Endnotes

- 1 Walter Wangerin, Jr, *Ragman: And Other Cries of Faith* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2004), 69–70. Wangerin’s advice has framed my own pastoral interaction and community outreach while serving as a pastor at Chapel of the Cross Lutheran Church, a multi-racial Lutheran congregation in north county, St. Louis. In addition, my doctoral work at Saint Louis University and my fellowship at the Black Metropolis Research Consortium at the University of Chicago have played a vital role in informing me about the language of the city and its many diverse people.
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- 3 For premier examples of American religious histories in the city, see John McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Robert Orsi, *Gods of the City: Religion and the American Urban Landscape* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); and Katie Day, *Faith on the Avenue: Religion on a City Street* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014). For more on religion in America, see Jon Butler, “Jack-in-the-Box Faith: The Religion Problem in Modern American History,” *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 4 (March 1, 2004): 1357–78.
- 4 Walt Wangerin served at Grace Lutheran Church in Evansville, IN in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For the remainder of his career, he was an author and professor at Valparaiso University. See Philip Yancey’s tribute, “My Benediction to the Beloved Storyteller, Walter Wangerin Jr,” in *Christianity Today*, August 9, 2021. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/august-web-only/walter-wangerin-jr-philip-yancey-tribute-storyteller.html>.
- 5 For instance, in *The Urban Church Imagined: Religion, Race, and Authenticity* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), Jessica Barron and Rhys Williams examine how several evangelical urban churches intentionally seek a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse congregation. Yet, despite the good intentions of these churches, they often reproduce racial and economic inequality despite their goal of inclusivity.
- 6 Robert Lupton, *Toxic Charities: How Churches and Charities Hurt Those They Help (and How to Reverse It)* (New York: HarperOne, 2012).
- 7 This article covers the time when First Immanuel Lutheran Church was a congregation within the LCMS. First Immanuel left the LCMS sometime after July 2016.
- 8 The (forthcoming) 2022 Multiethnic Symposium hosted by Concordia Seminary, St. Louis in partnership with Concordia University, St. Paul will explore this theme: “Rise and Enter the City”: The Hopeful Church in the Multiethnic City.” <https://concordiatheology.org/2021/11/call-for-papers-multiethnic-symposium-may-3-4-2022/>. I am grateful to Rev. Dr. Leo Sánchez for his insights and leadership in crafting the theme for this conference.
- 9 Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), xlv.
- 10 2022 Multiethnic Symposium. <https://concordiatheology.org/2021/11/call-for-papers-multiethnic-symposium-may-3-4-2022/>.
- 11 Samuel P. Hays, *The Response to Industrialism, 1885–1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1995).
- 12 For an excellent study on how Christian beliefs and values contributed to a more equitable and just society in Chicago, see Heath W. Carter, *Union Made Working People and the Rise of Social Christianity in Chicago* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- 13 Robert Putnam and David Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).
- 14 For a compelling argument on the need for proximity, see Bryan Stevenson’s presentation, “The Power of Proximity,” at the CEO Initiative 2018 sponsored by *Fortune* magazine. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1RyAwZIH04Y>.

- 15 For books on the relationship between religion and the city, see *Orsi's Gods of the City* and *Day's Faith on the Avenue*.
- 16 Matt Thompson, "Radio Atlantic: One Nation Under God?" *The Atlantic*, July 21, 2017. <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/07/radio-atlantic-one-nation-under-god/535206/>, 32:48-34:40.
- 17 It's not only the United States that is more urban and metropolitan. Global cities like London, Paris, Tokyo, Beijing, Hong Kong, and Singapore exert tremendous cultural, social, economic, and political influence throughout the world. See Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- 18 Michael O. Emerson, and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 19 "Racism and the Church: Overcoming the Idolatry," A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (February 1994): 39. <https://files.lcms.org/ff/CF31F293-63FA-4763-9793-C227DF3867E7>.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, Betsy Cooper, and Rachel Lienesch, "Anxiety, Nostalgia, and Mistrust: Findings from the 2015 American Values Survey," Public Religion Research Institute, November 17, 2015.
- 22 Rev. Dr. Ted Hopkins and I take up this question in "Faithful Witness in Wounded Cities: Congregation and Race in America," *Lutheran Mission Matters* 24, no. 2 (May 2016): 247–263.
- 23 For scholarship documenting the persistent racial segregation in American cities, see Amanda I. Seligman, *Block by Block: Neighborhoods and Public Policy on Chicago's West Side* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2005); Beryl Satter, *Family Properties: Race, Real Estate, and the Exploitation of Black Urban America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009); John McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996); and Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations," *The Atlantic*, May 21, 2014. For a recent LCMS appraisal of racism in the church, see Rev. Warren Lattimore, LCMS "Black Clergy Caucus Statement on George Floyd," *The Unbroken Cord*, 2020. www.theunbrokencord.com/writings/black-clergy-caucus-statement-on-george-floyd.
- 24 Colin Gordon, *Mapping Decline: St. Louis and the Fate of the American City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), xiii.
- 25 Arnold Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race & Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); and Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
- 26 I am grateful for the Lutheran theological insights of Rev. Dr. Leo Sánchez on the topic of justice. See Leopoldo A. Sánchez M, "The Human Face of Justice: Reclaiming the Neighbor in Law, Vocation, and Justice Talk," *Concordia Journal* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 117–132.
- 27 Lattimore, "Black Clergy Caucus Statement on George Floyd."
- 28 Sánchez, "The Human Face of Justice": 117–118.
- 29 The racial tension and urban unrest in both Ferguson, MO and Minneapolis, MN had striking similarities to the unrest and racial tension I've written about in Chicago in the 1950s and 1960s. In both eras, fierce debates and racial divisions resulted from these urban conflicts.
- 30 Theodore Hopkins offers a timely analysis of how the church should better understand itself and the world. Taking his cue from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Hopkins articulates how the Christian church is integrally connected to the story of God's action in the world through Jesus. For those interested in how the church can better live out its purpose, this book provides a keen analysis that seeks to inspire the church today to live as a community of faith that embodies the mission of Christ to the world. See Theodore J. Hopkins, *Christ, Church, and World: Bonhoeffer and Lutheran Ecclesiology after Christendom* (New York: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2021).
- 31 See resources on the LCMS webpage for Urban and Inner-City Mission. <https://www.lcms.org/how-we-serve/national/urban-and-inner-city-mission>. For another example of an LCMS congregation engaged with

- the city, see Rev. Steve Schave's mini documentary featuring St. Paul Lutheran Church in Madisonville, OH. <https://youtu.be/de5JoCsPycY>.
- 32 As I demonstrate in my dissertation, "Finding Their Footing in the Changing City: Protestant and Catholic Congregations Adapt to the New Urban Environment in Post-World War II Chicago," Protestants and Catholics discovered a new self-awareness when they paid attention to the larger social, economic, and political struggles of their urban communities. Whether it was worshipping in an ethnically diverse service, marching in the Chicago Freedom Movement, advocating for the rights of the working class, or uniting to preserve a historic church building, Protestant and Catholic communities in postwar Chicago experienced transformation when they helped people in their communities gain a footing in their physical and social lives in addition to their spiritual and religious lives.
- 33 I am grateful for Marcus Felde's insight and clarity on the gospel, "Church, Ministry, and the Main Thing," in Ed Schroeder, *Gift and Promise: The Augsburg Confession and the Heart of Christian Theology*, ed. Ronald Neustadt and Stephen Hitchcock (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2016), 85–96.
- 34 T. H. Hartman, "Men on a Mission: Lutherans Who Come to Grips with the Problems of the Inner-City Church," *Correspondent* (Appleton, WI: Aid Association for Lutherans), 58, no. 427 (Winter 1960): 5.
- 35 Don Becker, "Reflections on Race and the Church Today," 1965.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 2022 Multiethnic Symposium.
- 42 See Douglas L. Rutt, "Antioch as Paradigmatic of the Urban Center of Mission," *Missio Apostolica* 11 no 1 (May 2003). For a comprehensive look at urban ministry in the twenty-first century, see Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).

*Homiletical
Helps*

Anatomy of a Sermon

On Mark 6:14–29 by Mark Rouland

David Schmitt

Editor's note: The following sermon was preached by the Rev. Mark Rouland at Zion Lutheran Church in St. Charles, Missouri on July 15, 2018. The sermon is represented in italic type below which can be read all at once by following the gray bars in the margin.

Pastor Rouland is pursuing his Doctor of Ministry at Concordia Seminary with an emphasis in preaching. In this sermon, you can see him work with the art of narrative in proclamation.

Narrative preaching can have a bad reputation. Unbridled creativity has led to sermons filled with stories more fanciful than faithful. Misuse, however, is not an argument for disuse. Rather, it is a call for thinking more carefully about narrative preaching that we might pursue it more faithfully.

Narrative preaching is about more than telling stories in a sermon. It is about our God who works through story. When you open the Scriptures, you are confronted with a diversity of literary forms. God speaks his grace in many ways. Yes, there are teachings but not only teachings. God works through explanation and argumentation, but he also chooses to work through the complexity of narrative. Through narrative, God reveals himself, at work in the world, entering and embracing the concrete details of our lives in ways that are mysterious and saving.

In this sermon, Pastor Rouland works with a strange and challenging text. As Mark, the gospel writer, unfolds the ministry of Jesus, there are moments that foreshadow what will happen to Jesus and to those who follow him. Because of this, John's beheading is not an isolated incident, a mere historical curiosity to be gazed on from a distance. It is a revelation of forces that work within the world and fight against God's kingdom. As disciples go out in mission, under the authority of Jesus

(Mk 6:7–13, 30), Mark reminds us how the world resists God’s kingdom. In this one small scene, Mark offers a much larger picture of tensions that remain, even today, for disciples of Christ.

The art of preaching this narrative, then, lies in doing two things at once: evoking John’s beheading, a strange and distant experience, so that it reveals how near and personal the tensions of God’s kingdom remain for God’s people today.

Grace mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

[Narration] Herod the King was enjoying himself greatly. His belly stuffed by the feast, his mouth still dripping with drink that flowed freely, the hall was hot and smoky, torches lit the walls and flame and shadow danced across faces and every surface and now a young woman beautiful to his eyes danced for him too. That this was his stepdaughter and also his niece likely disturbs you and me, but not him, and that alone should probably tell you all you need to know about this man, and this party that he’s throwing. The elites of the area, leaders of business and military were invited and fed and entertained and an evening party that began when it was still light outside turned very dark very quickly. So immensely pleased was he by the way her body moved when she danced that he made this ridiculous offer: “I’ll give you whatever you ask for, up to half my kingdom.” Those around likely became silent, breath stilled in their chests, hearts beating faster even than the rhythm of the dance. You can imagine their displeasure, because basically the point of parties like this with the silly king was to garner favor when he was drunk and even more a fool than he normally was. Now, what they wanted, the chance for more power, the chance for more wealth, was offered to her.

One approach to telling a narrative is to begin with your ending in mind. Some narrative sermons spend too much time developing a social or physical setting. Hearers are given a host of concrete details setting the stage, but it takes forever for the actors to appear.

Here, Pastor Mark Rouland begins with a description of Herod in action. While the details draw you into the strangeness of this foolish king making promises at his party, the overall strategy of the sermon is to introduce you to an antithetical type of Christ. The sermon opens with a foolish king, offering foolish promises at a feast because the sermon will end with a faithful king, King Jesus, offering saving promises at his festal table.

Although the hearers do not know that this is where the sermon is headed, the preacher does. Mark develops the character of this king and the conflict his selfish satisfaction causes so that he might finally proclaim the character of another king and the salvation his selfless suffering offers.

Beginning a narrative sermon with the end in mind is one way of keeping the focus of the narrative tight and directing the attention of the hearers to central matters rather than peripheral ones.

[Narration] She disappointed them by not answering right away certainly. The moment had been so intense. "Maybe she didn't take the king seriously" they thought, "maybe he's already forgotten" they thought. But he hadn't forgotten, and she did take him seriously, and she went to her mother and asked what she should request. And her mother said, "I want the head of John the Baptist." And the young woman entered the stupid king's presence once again and passed on her mother's request, made even more vile, "I want it on a platter." And the king, whose life and reign was filled with lies and broken trust and promises chose this time to keep his worthless word, and so, disappointed as he was, waved his hand and made it so. They could've asked for half the kingdom, but they chose something more valuable, at least to them, life without guilt.

In narrative, there exists a tension between plot and character. Plot focuses upon action, unfolding an event that has significance for the hearers. Character focuses upon identity, developing people with whom the hearers have an invested relationship.

Most preachers would approach this story through the event of persecution. John the Baptist stands at the crosshairs of on-going conflict. The world is set against Christianity and persecutes its people. Just as John was persecuted for the faith, so too Jesus and his followers will be persecuted for the faith. In fact, in Mark's Gospel, this is the narrative reasoning that holds this story with the previous one of the disciples going out in mission. God's mission is done in a hostile world and leads to persecution.

Pastor Rouland, however, chooses to emphasize another theme. Here, notice how Mark quickly covers the details of the plot. His sermon is going to be less about the event of the beheading of John the Baptist and more about the characters who are involved in this tragedy and our relationship with them.

To navigate this change of emphasis, he asks the hearers to pause and look more closely at the girl and her mother. What is their relationship? What desire could be so strong that it could motivate a child to turn down the offer of half a kingdom and, instead, request the head of a prophet on a platter? With a very simple statement, Mark directs our attention to the desires that drive the action in this story—the foolishness of a king and the desires of his wife to have “life without guilt.”

[Reflection] Now I imagine that for us there might be some things that we find difficult to relate to here in the Gospel reading. I have most certainly woken up after a party with regret. But never blood on my hands or on my heart. There are nights, I have to confess, that get away from you, when you find yourself at a place or a

time that you can't really piece together how it all happened and why it happened. I have said, "did that really happen?" But never even in the foggiest of memories did I wonder if I saw a head of a prophet on a silver serving dish.

[Narration] But that fool Herod's wife, she was smart. Savvy and evil, and of course you can be both. While all through the palace party people were losing their heads, she had kept hers, clear and cunning. She was playing at the game you might know, the one where you win or you die, and she craved more influence, and this prophet, bearded and ugly and dirty, had stood in her way.

Narrative sermons have moments when the story is being told and moments when the preacher moves out of the story to offer reflection upon it. In this section of the sermon, notice how Mark moves outside of the story to offer a bit of reflection and then enters into the story again with a clearer focus on Herod's wife.

When you move outside the story in a narrative sermon, you should do so for a reason. The movement needs to be purposeful. Often preachers can pause the retelling of a story to offer incidental details that don't matter to the overall flow of the sermon. They go off on tangents. This is an invitation for hearers to get distracted and wander from the main point of the sermon.

Here, Mark is intentional about the movement outside the telling of the story. He seeks to cultivate our identification with a minor character: Herod's wife. How does he do that? He pauses for a moment so that we can see how much we are unlike King Herod. He directs us away from identifying with the foolishness of this king to open us toward the possibility that there might be another character with whom we could identify, namely Herod's wife.

This is what Mark Alan Powell in his book *What Do They Hear?*, calls empathy casting. Powell argues that people, depending on their social location, will naturally identify with certain characters in a story. He suggests, however, that such identification is not unchanging. When offered an invitation and when given enough development, hearers can identify with characters that they might otherwise overlook.

This, I believe, is the situation facing Pastor Rouland in this sermon. Hearers would likely identify with John the Baptist, a figure of the persecuted Christian, or possibly even King Herod, a selfish fool who got carried away at a party and made a promise he didn't want to keep. But Mark desires that you identify with Herod's wife. So, he pauses for a moment to meditate on how far from us the figure of King Herod truly is. This then opens the possibility that we might be closer to someone else.

Without saying anything at this point, Mark enters back into the story so that we might look more closely at Herod's wife and see if there is anything in her situation that might resonate with us today.

[Narration] John had long been imprisoned by the fool king Herod, but for whatever reason in moments of clarity, the king occasionally had John brought into his throne room to hear him speak, and maybe that's no surprise, John was special. John was the one of course, you might remember, who thousands and thousands came to hear preach. Were baptized by him in the Jordan River, just as Jesus himself was. And John's message hadn't changed; back in the day he was always heard talking of repentance, and offering a baptism that was meant to turn you toward something new, given from on high. Now, standing before the fool king Herod, he still talked of repentance. Didn't beg for his release or butter up the sloppy king, but said rather, "How you're living right now, it ain't right."

Here, we see a technique called temporal incursion. As the biblical story is being told, suddenly we hear language that sounds like it comes from the contemporary world. There is an incursion of contemporary language into the time period of the story. John the Baptist doesn't "butter up" the king but instead speaks quite plainly. Colloquially. "How you're living right now, it ain't right."

Temporal incursion is used for moments of great significance in a narrative sermon. The preacher wants to make sure that his hearers feel the connection between what is happening in the story and their lives today. Rather than pause and explain the connection, the preacher uses contemporary language to cultivate that connection. For a moment, it is as if John the Baptist is standing in our midst, offering us a call to repentance. His language isn't distant. It isn't located in the first century or loaded with the theological terminology of the intervening centuries. No. It is simple. Clear. Almost blunt. Calling us out in our sin. Telling us that "how you're living right now, it ain't right."

Of course, none of this is stated explicitly. That's the power of narrative. It gets us caught up in an experience before we realize what is going on. As I said earlier, the narrative preacher tells a story with the end in mind, and, in this case, the call to repentance then is leading to a call to repentance now. Mark is exploring our human motivation to avoid the experience of guilt. And so, when the prophet speaks words that evoke a sense of guilt, Mark uses a temporal incursion to make sure that they cross the centuries and resonate for us today.

[Narration] And what wasn't right about it was that Herod had taken his brother's wife to be his wife. And his brother, so you know, hadn't died. He had taken her simply because he wanted to, and sometimes people in power have a way of believing that, because they can do what they want, they should do what they want (whereas you and I, as followers of King Jesus, know that the greatest power ever shown was shown through restraint). John said clearly that Herod's life wasn't right. And the queen didn't like it. Felt the words of the prophet John kept her from influence ever so much, felt trapped by the words of a man in

prison. So now the moment presents itself, and she doesn't hesitate. "Ask for his head," she tells her daughter. And she does. And it happens. And though many, many of those who left there that night woke up with guilt and distaste, she didn't, and she knew that over the days ahead, her fool husband and king would learn to live without guilt too, because John was dead, and he'd never have to hear John's incisive sermons again.

At this point, Mark brings the story to a close. As he does so, Mark introduces us to the idea that there are followers of King Herod and followers of King Jesus. By doing that, Mark foreshadows the conclusion of the sermon that contrasts the reign of Herod and the reign of Jesus.

Before getting ahead of himself, however, Mark focuses his closing moments on the character of Herod's wife. Strange as it may seem, Mark desires for his hearers to identify with Herod's wife. He knows that if we can confess the power of our experience of guilt, a power that leads to devastating actions in this story, we will be prepared to experience the power of King Jesus. So, the closing moments turn our attention to the figure of Herod's wife and a repetition of Mark's understanding of why she did what she did: she killed John the Baptist in order to live without guilt.

[Reflection] And for all the foreignness this level of palace intrigue seems to us, that's a desire I think we might be able to relate to. Not to witness the heinousness of this, not to end the life of another, but to live without guilt. Here's what I'm trying to say: John the Baptist brought a message to Herod that was about God's law, and how that word from God told Herod that his life needed changing, and rather than see that change happen in heart and life, it was easier to put his head on a platter. And here's the point, though our lives might be filled with less obvious darkness than was evident at that party in Herod's palace, I wonder if we occasionally have a similar reaction . . . easier to kill the messenger than hear the message.

In narrative preaching, after the story is finished, the preacher can guide Christian reflection on it. In doing this, it is often helpful to be quite clear about the principles you seek to convey. Stories, as you know, are polyvalent. Different people are drawn to different dynamics and hear them in different ways. A preacher, therefore, can assist the hearers in meditating on the story by being direct about the main idea he wants to communicate.

Here, Mark uses contrast to highlight the one connection he wants his hearers to see. In the story, Mark developed for us the desires motivating Herod's wife. While we may not identify with the sexual intrigue, the politics, or the desire for murder in her experience, Mark suggests that we might be able to identify with one thing: her desire to live without guilt.

Rather than declare this to be true of us, however, Mark suggests it: “I wonder if we occasionally have a similar reaction.” He lets the power of story invite us to contemplate our lives. As the sermon continues, Mark will further develop this connection for us, leading us to confession. But he knows that a full-frontal attack at this point might be too strong, so, instead, Mark invites the hearers to meditate with him and see what happens.

[Reflection] No matter who you are, no matter what you are, there are times when the word of God interrupts the flow of our lives and says, “stop, turn, and hear righteousness and holiness from God.” And the hard and inconvenient truth is sometimes that we’d rather turn our backs on God, than hear his words. I believe inside my heart of hearts, that many who fall away from the faith did it for this reason. And it isn’t an indictment on them so much as a warning to us. I believe that many people leave the God they once loved because they didn’t want to live with guilt anymore. Easier to wash hands of it all, easier to chop the word of God’s law off, than listen, and live with guilt, live with a word that demands we sometimes turn and change and confess. Easier sometimes to choose a new view of the world, regardless of whether we actually think it right, as long as it doesn’t challenge my way of living and behaving.

And all of that I think comes from a misunderstanding of what you and I are meant to do with guilt. I’ve sometimes heard people say that the reason they work hard, give hard, pray hard, is because of Lutheran guilt. And I get that. And we aren’t the sole purveyors of that either. If you grew up Catholic you know that’s a thing too. The point is, when you and I are faced with a feeling of guilt, when we bump into God’s word that says, “this ain’t right,” we aren’t offered only the two choices of either turning our back on it all or trying to work our way out of it.

Here, Mark is leading his hearers to confession. In a culture where the ways of the world are so far from the ways of God, the church can often be heard as only a purveyor of guilt. The church is seen as constantly speaking a stream of condemnation, and people don’t hear God’s grace because they walk away before it is spoken.

Mark is aware of this problem, and he does what he can to gain a hearing for God’s grace. Mark doesn’t do this by overlooking the law or soft-pedaling it. Rather, Mark retains the judgment of God’s law. He names the experiences of guilt and calls our attention to them.

But what Mark also does is show compassion for those who hear the law and are confronted by it. Mark names the ways we suffer when we hear the law and, by naming them, shows that he not only understands the experience but loves the people who are suffering and desires to show them a better way.

In doing this, Mark describes the wrong ways in which we can deal with guilt. He is examining our character today. People unfortunately feel that they only have two options: to walk away from God or to put their head down and work harder.

It is in this context of these two errors that Mark opens the sermon for people to hear the proclamation of the gospel.

[Reflection] You see the message of King Jesus, the invitation of King Jesus to you, today, is rather to bring your guilt to him. To watch as God nails your guilt to the cross. To watch as he turns you and changes you, and then, in the freedom of forgiveness, turns you toward righteousness and holiness. You see, righteousness and holiness, they don't gain God's favor. They are gifts that come with God's favor.

So for all of us, those who are struggling to believe, those who are struggling to behave, those who are struggling to keep the faith, those in doubt, those ready to turn their backs, . . . to all of us . . . comes this encouragement from God's word today to remember that, when we are welcomed into the feast that our King provides, it is not a feast that you will leave with regret or shame. Those things were washed away when Jesus showed his mighty power of love, when he restrained his strength on the cross, purchasing your seat at his holy table. So, we won't wake up from that party with blood on our hands, but on the hands of the one who welcomes you in, oh they've been bloodied for sure.

A reminder that we don't live without guilt by turning our back and running away. We get to live without guilt by staying close to Jesus, by living under the reign of the one who cares so much for us that he restrained his power on the cross to purchase your seat at his table. A reminder to listen to John preach. It might not always be easy. In fact, it might be exceptionally difficult. But in the end, it will be worth it. Amen.

Mark closes the sermon with a call to repentance and a proclamation of grace. Here, notice how Mark is intentional in his imagery. The way he told the narrative earlier prepares us for this closing proclamation of the gospel. Narrative preaching is Christocentric in its poetics. The imagery of the narrative is used to open our eyes to the proclamation and rule of King Jesus. Jesus stands at the end of the sermon as the true king, who restrained his power and died on the cross, that he might keep his promises to forgive your sins and offer you a seat at his banquet table.

Unlike Herod's wife and a host of others throughout history, we don't need to kill God's prophet or run away from his proclamation or put our heads down and work harder to deal with guilt. Instead, we bring it to Jesus who forgives our sins and welcomes us to his table.

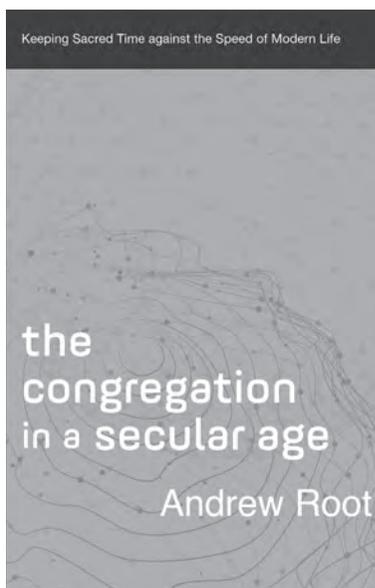
Reviews

THE CONGREGATION IN A SECULAR AGE: Keeping Sacred Time against the Speed of Modern Life. By Andrew Root. Baker Academic, 2021. Paper. 288 pages. \$26.99.

In a teaser for the popular television series *Ted Lasso*, Coach Lasso inspires his soccer team to embrace the here and now as a gift, after all, it's called the present. Inhabiting the present as a sacred gift from God marks the significance of Andrew Root's *The Congregation in a Secular Age*, the third and final volume of his ministry-focused engagements with Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*. (A review of volumes one and two can be found in the Fall 2020 volume of the *Concordia Journal*.)

The recent COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated feelings of burnout in congregations. Root offers a way for congregations to move from feeling that time and resources are depleted to being resonant communities of transformation.

The Congregation in a Secular Age covers culture and theology on time and the congregation and concludes with hints of ecclesiology. Root adds theological analysis to the cultural and philosophical insights of Charles Taylor and the contemporary German social theorist Hartmut Rosa, as well as prescient points of the French sociologist Alain Ehrenberg on depression and the fatigue of creating and curating a distinct self in our context of Taylor's age of authenticity. Root writes, "in late modernity the issue became



despondency, a feeling that you just can't find the energy to keep pace" (7). According to Root, "faithfulness has been replaced with a drive for vitality" (xii). Root calls local congregations to focus on the divine action of the Triune God who bestows abundant life and shapes the Christian life of giving and receiving.

Root's exploration of secular and sacred time and its huge impact on the congregation is divided into three parts. Part one details the ennui of depressed congregations and offers a panorama of our secular age's fascination with fullness and busyness. Root sees Silicon Valley as the brazen time keepers of our secular age who use various means to mediate their mantra of "Innovate, change or die!" (55). Root adds that the demand for congregations and pastors to be disruptive innovators is simply a

shift from state-bound Christendom to a digitally bound one (125). As pastors and faith leaders of all size congregations can attest, “Once the congregation concedes to helping people find fullness through busyness, it sets itself up to lose them” (40). Root warns that imploring congregations to change or die will produce only dying congregations (260).

The second part examines congregational despondence and alienation through dimensions of acceleration in technology, society, and the pace of life. Root shows that simply slowing down or checking out as a congregation will not stop the accelerations of modernity. Indeed, according to Root, when acceleration in all its dimensions occurs, no one escapes deprivation or the time and resource famine.

Part three invites congregations and pastors to reposition from relevance to resonance and relationships. Root articulates that the response to the accelerations of our secular age is the eros of the Trinity. He applies the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the orthodox theologian Christos Yannaras to the life and ministry of congregations. The ecstasy of the love of the persons of the Trinity is realized in the relational love of persons radiating out to persons, a love that carries children—just as Mary carries Christ—and creates community.

The Congregation in a Secular Age presents numerous points of encouragement for harried pastors and leaders in the church on culture and theology in relation to time and the

congregation. For example, Root states that while innovation promises to be the answer to congregational funk, it just adds to the malaise (225). Instead, “Programs and strategies are best born out of a story of transformation. Congregations should yearn for a story, not just look for innovating programming” (209). Drawing on the theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Root states that churches should not be volunteer societies that become burned out zombies, but a life-community of relationships as formed by the trinitarian relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. “If a congregation wants change,” and as this book affirms change in the human flux of life is inevitable, “it will start not by being concerned with relevance and resources, but with the good life of resonance, seeking for the living Christ where Christ can be found, in the disclosure of personhood, where time is not made to accelerate but becomes full and sacred” (261). While Root alludes to the rhythms of the liturgy, more can and should be said about the sacraments in relation to full and sacred time in, with, and under the congregation. In book eleven of *Confessions*, St. Augustine famously ruminates on the nature of time. While Augustine concludes that time is a mystery, God nonetheless relates to us in time. In the spirit of Augustine, *The Congregation in a Secular Age* meditates on finding the sacred in the present.

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**WORK AND CREATIVITY: A
Philosophical Study from Creation
to Postmodernity.** By *André*

*LaCocque. Lexington Books, 2020. 133
pages. \$89.96.*

With an economy of words that is remarkable and challenging, LaCocque tackles his subject with confidence and skill demonstrating a command not only of the biblical creation account but of key figures in modern thought. By necessity, it quite obviously ignores vast swaths of significant history and thought on the topic of work and its relation to leisure and the meaning of human life. Nevertheless, the author delivers what he promises, and provides poignant insights en route to supporting his argument that work is “incontrovertibly an existential ingredient of human life and even, as I shall argue, the central value at the root of the *imago dei*” (1). This thesis, and the supporting biblical evidence, is perhaps the greatest contribution as the book manages to affirm without apology what even the first reader of the creation account intuits: man is made to work. Yes, work is complicated by the curse of the fall, but it is not thereby utterly destroyed any more than man’s rational capabilities are utterly destroyed.

LaCocque’s exegetical work is rooted in the critical tradition, and so references to the various JEDP strands run through the text. Notwithstanding his underpinnings, LaCocque makes clear the distinctive position of the biblical creation account in contrast to the assumptions of near eastern and western

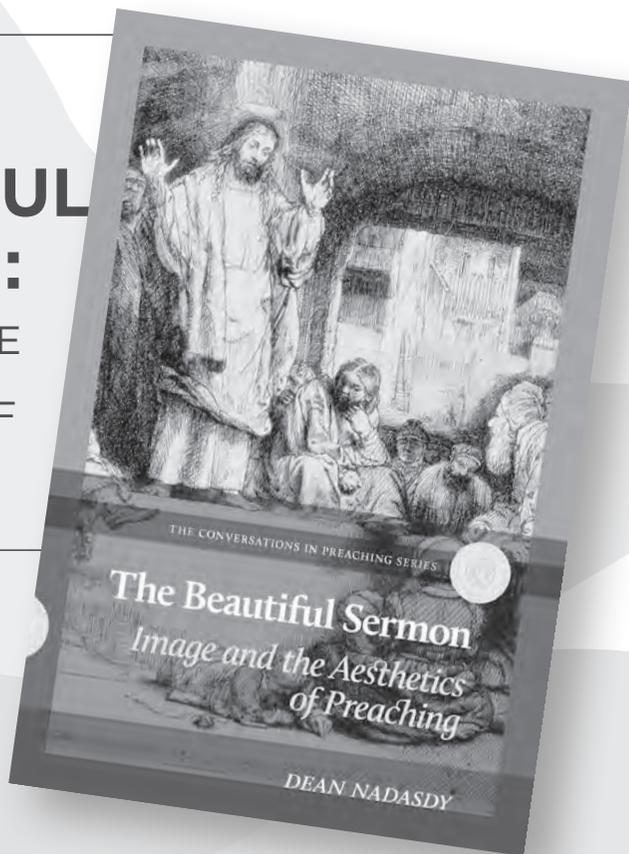
wisdom which typically sees work as inherently negative. “Work—any work, at the mill, the office, the study, the kitchen—is creative, a co-creation with the Creator” (75). LaCocque accordingly paints vocation in a positive light, “Beings and things created are appropriately equipped for fulfilling a vocation,” and even credits Luther with bringing this truth to greater light (33, 75). It is the connection of work to the incarnate God that drives the author’s thinking: “Work is incarnation par excellence,” since God himself deigns to work in and through his creation (77). It is perhaps too much to ask that further exploration of the depth and height of God’s incarnation might come into view, but such explicitly Christian elements as Jesus and the gospel are absent, leaving the Christian reader to supply the greater truth and wonder of God’s full and completed work in Christ. LaCocque comes close; “Hence, the human fulfillment does not consist in retrieving a state of childhood innocence (irresponsibility) but in the supreme Art of achieving a second/mature innocence” (76). Replacing “achieving” with “receiving” is enough to move this insight into the bright light of the gospel itself. This work, though, must be performed by the reader.

Interfacing a host of western luminaries with the creation accounts of Genesis is an unlikely project, but one that yields remarkably rewarding results. This is interdisciplinary work at its best and is bound to provoke in the reader fruitful reflection, application, and perhaps even labor.

Joel Biermann

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