

REDEEMER VISION PAPER #2

THE CITY: WHY WE'RE HERE

Fundamental to Redeemer's vision is the belief that there is no better place for Christians to live, work, serve, and spend their lives and resources than in the city. Why?

1. The gospel originally grew in and through the city.

The *Pax Romana* (27BC-180AD) led to the growth of the first multi-ethnic, global cities. Travel was easier than it ever had been and ever would be again until the 19th century. Nationalities that had been at war with one another were now at 'peace' under the iron rule of Rome. Cities became multi-cultural and the hub of international networks of capital and information—essentially, city-states. For example, Antioch was really a United Nations, with a Asian, African, Jewish, Greek, and Roman sections. Capital and culture flowed back and forth from Antioch to three continents through urban-based networks.

The missionary strategy of the early church was extremely 'urban-centric.'¹ Acts 16 shows the pattern. Paul is called by God to reach Macedonia, so he automatically chooses to go to the largest city of the region (v.16). Over and over in both the book of Acts and the history of the local church, we see Christian missionaries doing urban church planting in the largest city of the region and then leaving the area altogether. Why? They knew that once they reached the city, they had reached the society and culture. Yale scholar Wayne Meeks explains why it was so brilliant to target cities:

a) City dwellers are confronted daily with new experiences, people and situations, and are therefore more open to new ideas than more insulated (and conservative) rural people.

b) City dwellers are more connected and mobile so that when one of them is converted, the chance of the gospel spreading far and wide is much greater. In the multi-ethnic cities, the gospel can be preached in the *lingua franca* of the city, yet reach back (through cultural, international networks) into dozens of nations.

c) City dwellers have a great deal of 'cultural clout.' If you go to the village, you may win the lawyer in town for Christ, but if you want to have an impact on the legal profession, you go to the cities where the law schools and legal networks are based.

d) Cities have many social problems and tensions. Historian Rodney Stark says early Christianity spread so rapidly because the love and service of Christians amidst urban problems was so striking.

"To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as real hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachment. To cities filled with widows and orphans, Christianity offered a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity...I am not saying the misery of the ancient world caused the advent of Christianity...people had been enduring for centuries without the aid of Christian theology or social structures. I am arguing that once Christianity did appear, its superior capacity for meeting human problems soon became evident and played a major role in its ultimate triumph...for what Christianity brought was not simply an urban movement, but a new culture. (Stark, The Rise of Christianity, p.161)

¹ Two books that document the urban-centric nature of early Christian mission are Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* and Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*. Richard Fletcher's *The Barbarian Conversion* shows that the same pattern occurred during the evangelization of Europe. Christianity first dominated the cities and only secondarily spread to the countryside. Philip Jenkins's *The Next Christendom* reveals that much of the explosive growth of Christianity today in Africa, Latin America, and Asia is happening through cities. Rural tribes are finding Christ when they immigrate to urban areas.

By 300 A.D. 50% of the city populations were Christian while the countryside was still pagan (the word *paganus* probably meant 'rural dweller'). But as the city went so (eventually) went all of society. So it is today. If a Christian can live in the city, it is (overall) the most strategic place to be.

2. God's people have been called to live in and love the city.

When Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem, he brought thousands of Jewish exiles to live in the pagan mega-city of Babylon. At first the exiles refused to move into the wicked city, settling outside in their own enclave, but God spoke to them through Jeremiah and gave them a startling mandate. First, he spoke to them of their *actions* toward the city. He told them to move in, settle down, raise their families there, and invest in the economy of the city (Jer 29:5-6). Second, he spoke to them of their *attitude* toward the city. He said, "*Seek the shalom of the city.*" (v.7) The word 'shalom' meant full flourishing-economically, culturally, spiritually. And most amazing of all, God said, "*Pray to the Lord for it, for if it prospers, you prosper.*" (v.7)

In short, God called his people to live in the unbelieving city and *love* it. They were to work for its health and prosperity even as they kept their own distinctive beliefs and practices. God said, "*Increase there, do not decrease*" (v.6b). They were not to assimilate and lose their identity as followers of God's word and law, but they were to use the resources of their faith to love their neighbor and love the city in which they lived.

It is no accident that this mandate to the Old Testament people of God is exactly what we see the New Testament people of God doing in the book of Acts, with its urban-centric mission. One of the main ways God's people can honor his name and spread his praise is by living in and loving the great cities of the world. We have centuries of historical proof that the mandate of Jeremiah 29 works.

Early in Redeemer's ministry we discovered that it was not enough for Christians to feel pity or even mere affection for the city. Staff and leaders had to humbly learn from and respect New York City and its people. Our relationship with the people of Manhattan had to be a consciously reciprocal one. We had to see God's 'common grace' in them. We had to learn that we needed them to fill out our own understanding of God and his grace, just as they needed us for the same. We had to be energized and enriched by the city, not just drained by it. That was, and is, the only way to *love* the city. Ministry in the city will help you grasp the gospel of grace in powerful ways. You may even come to see that you spiritually need the city more than the city needs you.

This raises several practical questions: "Are we saying all Christians must live in cities?" No. "But aren't cities bad places to raise children?" No. "Why do so many Christians find the city a difficult place to live?" It's complicated. These questions are dealt with in the addendum to this paper - "Questions on living in the city."

3. Jesus died to bring us a great city.

When God created the world, he did not produce a fully-developed human civilization. Instead he made the first human beings his partners in this enterprise. What an honor! He told Adam and Eve to '*have dominion,*' to develop a world and society by bringing forth the riches God put into nature (and human nature) at creation. It was a call to create a world and civilization that glorified God. But Adam and Eve soon failed their commission to be servants of God, cultivating creation under his Lordship. Centuries later, Jesus Christ appeared as the "new Adam." He became the head of a new humanity who re-creates a world under God.

When we get to the very end of the Bible in Revelation 21-22, and we glimpse the climax of history, we see the ultimate fruit of the work of the new Adam—it is a city! When the world is finally in the condition Jesus died to produce, we discover that the earth has become an urban center. God begins history in a garden, but he ends it in a city! In the middle of the City-to-Come we see the tree of life! Why? This *is* paradise restored. God's future world is urban. When we look

at the new heavens and new earth as they are depicted in Revelation and Isaiah, we see the multi-ethnic diversity, population density, cultural richness of urban life, purged of all the flaws of today's cities due to human sinfulness.

What does this mean for us? God created the human family, and even though sin has harmed it, we are called to use the resources of the gospel to repair broken families. Likewise, God made the city for his purposes, and though sin has harmed it, we should use the resources of the gospel to repair broken cities.

Jesus went up to the city, and was crucified 'outside the city gate' (Heb 13:12), a Biblical metaphor for forsakenness. Jesus lost the city that was, so we can be citizens of the city to come (Heb 11:10; 12:22,) making us salt and light in the city that is (Matt 5:13-16). Our citizenship in the City-to-come, by his grace, equips us for the city that is.

Addendum: QUESTIONS ON LIVING IN THE CITY

A. *But do you mean that all Christians must live in cities?* The answer is no. We aren't saying that. We need Christians and churches everywhere there are people—and all people do not live in cities. We also know not all Christians *can* live in cities, for various personal, vocational, economic, and other reasons. However we still believe that cities are a most strategic place for Christians to be. In comparison to non-urban areas, cities have not been well served by the Christian church. So we encourage believers in Jesus to stay in the city and minister here.

It is difficult to strike a balance here. God does not call everyone to live in a city, nor does he call everyone to live their entire lives in a city. People who find great opportunity to use their gifts productively elsewhere need be able to go out from the city without guilt. On the other hand, people who will not even *think* of living in the city for selfish or cowardly reasons need to be confronted. At Redeemer, we have always encouraged Christians to live in the city and stay here as long as they can, but when they have good reasons to move out we bless them without condemnation.

B. *But isn't it bad for your family? The city isn't a good place to raise children, is it?* Our three sons grew up in the city. (They were 11, 9, and 5 when we moved to Manhattan.) They regularly thank us for raising them here, and they give some of the following reasons.

- First, it made them resourceful. After living in New York City, nothing intimidates them. They feel they can get along and get around anywhere.
- Second, it brought them into close contact with an enormous range of people of different races, classes, worldviews, religions, and temperaments. Very little daunts them now! They have both acquaintances and friends among a great diversity of humanity.
- Third, the big city has exposed them to a stunning range of cultural opportunities. The concerts, museums, galleries, and theaters have enriched and challenged them and made them considerably less parochial.
- Last, my kids insist that Christianity is more vital in the city. There is almost no 'cultural' Christianity. People do not go to church here because it is expected. People cannot be Christians here without getting strongly challenged and questioned all the time by their friends. This forces believers to be much more thoughtful and to be able to understand and articulate their faith.

As a result of growing up in New York City, my children were exposed to scores of strong, young urban Christians that were extremely attractive models to them. These are the same reasons that so many Christians find (to their surprise) that their faith thrives in a city like nowhere else. Daily life here is a dazzling education, a never-boring engagement with the sources of cultural production, a unique opportunity to practice cross-cultural Christian community, and a challenge to constantly go deeper in understanding and articulating what we believe.

C. But why do I as a Christian find it hard to imagine living here long-term? The city is a difficult place for many people to live, but I'm not sure we should attribute it to our Christianity. The Christian church in America is mainly middle class and non-urban. That is the background of many believers. We value privacy, safety, homogeneity, sentimentality, space, order and control. But the city is filled with ironic, edgy, diverse people who do not value these things at all. The city is an *easier* place to live (than the rest of the country) if you are poor or rich, if you are non-white, if you are single, if you are rather unconventional in your tastes. But it is a harder place to live if you are a white, middle-class family. The plain fact is that the great majority of Protestant Christians in this country simply will find the city an uncomfortable place to live. But that is not because of our Christianity.

We have to admit, however, that by anyone's cultural standards, the city *is* a hard place to live for many reasons. It is terribly expensive, even in the inner city. It is a complicated place to live--legally, socially, and politically. It is highly mobile, and long-time residents suffer the continual loss of relationships. The city also is filled with idols (cf. Acts 17) of sex, money, and power. Many give in to temptation. Yet, while Christians should not blindly seek difficulty, neither should we blindly seek comfort. We should seek to follow the incarnate Christ, who did not live where he was comfortable but where he was useful (Rom 15:3).

The early church increased in influence and relevance because it was urban. This is what God told us in Jeremiah 29. The modern U.S. church is fast losing cultural and economic force because it avoids the city. The only solution is that a lot of Christians who are not naturally comfortable and indigenous to the city will have to follow Abraham and live by faith, using the comfort and joy of the gospel to face the difficulties of being here and breaking through to the greatness of it. Abraham was called to leave the familiar culture and become a pilgrim, seeking the city of God (Gen.12:1-4; Heb.11:8-10)².

² A good way to start thinking about the importance of the city is to read two popularly written books by Ray Bakke, *The Urban Christian* (IVP, 1987) and *A Theology as Big as the City* (IVP, 1997.)