3-2016

Serving Christ in the City

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Recommended Citation
Bell, Skip, "Serving Christ in the City" (2016). Faculty Publications. 167.
https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/pubs/167

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Can Christians maintain their spirituality and carry out the gospel commission in one of today’s urban centers? Most western cities are dominated by secularism and lifestyles that are anything but Christian. They are case studies for the idea of a post-Christian world.

Disciple making in an urban center requires connecting with people, engaging with the culture, serving sacrificially, living faith publicly, and challenging reasoning. Being present in the city with any meaningful level of relational engagement without being offensive or dismissed as being religious oddities is a difficult challenge in post-Christian culture. Some conservative Christians believe this to be impossible.

But it is simply not accurate to say that spirituality is dead in the secular city. It is organized religion that is threatened. Spirituality is alive. However, there are new gods usurping the primacy of Christian faith. Those gods can be thought of in terms such as opportunity, wealth, technology, or art. Spiritual ideas and dialogue still exist. But the new spirituality of the Western developed world has little regard for organized religion.

**Living an incarnational life**

The reality of Christian mission is that God has called us to enter into life in the city. God has not called us to hate the city or to abandon the city to evil.

The biblical record of Daniel and his companions offers one of many biblical illustrations of the summons of God to live in a non-Christian culture and maintain missional witness. The captive Israelites were commanded to pray for Babylon and seek its welfare, even though the city was characterized by idolatry and sinfulness. “But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare” (Jer. 29:7). The prophet uses the Hebrew word *shalom* in describing this intention of God for the captives and the city. They were to seek *shalom* for the foreign city, and in so doing experience God’s blessing themselves. *Shalom* suggests wholeness and blessing, “a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonders as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights.”

The call is complex. It is not satisfied by simply taking up residence in the suburban boundaries of urban areas. Nor can Christians respond faithfully to a missional call by creating Christian enclaves in the city center, isolating themselves in an artificially created foreign culture in urban space. Incarnational living means living in and affecting the culture in the same neighborhood, workplace, or school that others move about in.

How does a Christian go about changing the culture? Relationships are foundational and primary. That is where changing the culture begins. Such relationships require commitment to a neighborhood, meaning that Christians live among others in that neighborhood. Christians can provide a transforming influence only when joining in the same activities, getting involved in the issues of the community, and becoming known within the community. That cannot be done while living in the suburbs and driving into the city only to work or worship. As Jesus left heaven to dwell with us, so Christian disciples are to move out of protective walls and be with the people of the city. They must know others and be known, in the context of the activities that form daily life. This defines truly incarnational living: working, learning, playing, and engaging in dialogue with others while living among them.

The goal of incarnational living is to serve. Incarnational living in the city does not require disciples to move out of their comfort zone. Some would suggest it does. But for those called to missional life in the city, security in Christ and clarity regarding the call to discipleship provides an appreciation of the city and the empowerment to live in that space with joy. The church can affirm that calling. Affirming the incarnational life in the city celebrates living there, working there, attending to the cultural life of arts, engaging in technology, serving in neighborhood and community organizations, joyfully socializing, making friends, and happily doing so while acknowledging Christ. Incarnational living is experienced on the level of service and friendship rather than exhortation, though doors...
Staying Christian

Living in the city does not mean a Christian has abandoned their faith. Christians do not need to act like their secular neighbors to live happily, serve God, serve their neighbor, or be valued in their community. Too many believe they must make a choice between two options: flee the city or abandon their Christian convictions in order to assimilate into the life of the city. That is not the case.

A word of caution is appropriate at this point. Temptations assault a person on a daily basis, especially in an urban context. The density of humanity means the actions of those who abuse sexuality, those who espouse dishonesty, or those who disrespect humanity in varied ways are evident. Because of the density of population, such behaviors are arguably more apparent in the city. Though sin abounds, most people living in urban contexts seek a responsible, if not righteous, life.

Also, the overt sins in the urban space are easier to avoid than the more subtle. The simple siren song of success is subtle and can lead us to copy the ways of secularism with little warning. Too often financial success or acclaim becomes idolatry that attacks a Christian’s worldview. Creativity, while generally a gift of God, can become human in orientation; reason, itself, can become a substitute for faith; and technology can empower humanity beyond a sense of the wonder of God. These are the subtle temptations that can gradually alter the nature of spirituality and lead Christians to worship the false gods of secularism.

Living in the city center without becoming worshipers of such idols requires an energetic and practiced biblical worldview while practicing the disciplines of biblical spirituality. And Christians must have the courage to make their faith evident in the context of the city. “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world” (John 17:15-18).

Changing the culture

Christians who live their faith publicly will impact the culture. If they truly reflect the heart of God, that Christian worldview affects every facet of life. The impact on culture implies they are genuinely, biblically faithful rather than simply reflectors of an institutional religious culture of their upbringing. A biblical Christian interprets what is right, just, beautiful, and good in all they do—the do so even without quoting the Bible or preaching a sermon. Thus, living as followers of Jesus offers society an alternate culture. Little need exists for Christians to judge the effects of secularism in post-Christian culture. Instead, they can serve as advocates for justice, the poor, and the abused. They can value and celebrate diversity. They can demonstrate the heart of God. They can respect those who think seriously about their worldviews, while challenging the gods of secularity. People will see the difference.

There are encouraging demonstrations of Christians working with churches and impacting the urban culture. First Baptist Church in Orlando serves women with unwanted pregnancies in an affirming, extended, and life-changing way. Park Avenue in Boston creates community among artists who use their gifts to glorify God. Fourth Presbyterian in Chicago helps urban residents learn to garden so they can live healthier lives. Paradise Valley Seventh-day Adventist Church helps immigrants in the San Diego area settle into responsible family contexts and thrive in their new community. There are innumerable examples of Christians impacting urban culture. So the challenge is not whether Christians can impact the culture. They can. The challenge is whether they will boldly live publicly for Christ instead of retreating.

“Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27). The life of a follower of Jesus may be recognized in clear contrast to the values of secular culture. Certainly, the disciple of Christ both demonstrates behaviors in the public square that represent the heart of God and speaks to public issues. These issues include marriage, sexuality, health care, education, justice, violence, poverty, racism, and immigration. Christians voice the will of God in public life on such issues and do so skillfully, not in a way that offends or passes judgment. To avoid speaking to issues for fear of destroying relationships would be to deny the witness Christ offers to humanity. But to speak with self-centered judgment or arrogance would undermine Christian witness. Christians must learn to verbalize the principles and practices of God’s love in winsome ways.

Providing a presence for Christ in an urban culture is not the total of Christian witness. Such living opens relationships in which the content and ideas of Christianity must be explored. In those relationships, opportunities surface in which the Scripture can be offered as a revelation of God, His will, redemption, and calling for a transformed life.

Making Christianity public

In the process of living as a disciple of Christ, life is experienced without fear of being different. That is, a Christian simply lives as a Christian, reflecting Christian values, ethics, and relationships in public space. Therefore the Christian’s life is not private, but seen, heard, and often distinct without apology.

Fear gets in the way of public Christianity. One such perspective on fear is the fear of not being accepted. That worry leads some Christians to privatize their faith—submerging faith in a way that avoids exposure. Naturally, humans shrink from derision or from
disrespect for the worldview they hold. This fear exposes the insecurities that emerge when one sees themselves in a minority.

Sometimes fear among urban Christians takes the form of an excessive concern for being “not of this world.” In this form it is the fear of becoming something loosely described as “worldly.” The result is that matters of faith become hidden and kept separate from ordinary existence in a secular world. Responding to the demands of this fear, spaces are created that provide safety and security, untouched by the proximity of darker influences or relationships with those who live secular lives. Fear leads to separation, and in that environment, faith becomes private. The result? The difficulty of living out a Christian life in an urban context is avoided, and in fact, the witness of a Christian life is lost.

Christ boldly lived as God among us. Even today He transforms culture through His disciples and transforms the culture of the city. He marches on city hall to address such issues as police brutality, health care, or gun violence. He sits on boards of public education and seeks the welfare of children. He leads in the public issues of housing, poverty, health care, and art in neighborhoods and municipal government. He serves. He does so kindly, indwelling with His disciples by the Spirit, not as a raging prophet who casts judgment or patronizes with acts of pity and then runs to the suburb or safe walls of the church. He lives with the people and serves in a public manner. Christianity is public.

Ellen G. White reflected on the concerns for Christian life and mission in the city. Her counsel is representative of much of the counsel offered on this question by writers from diverse faith traditions. When she wrote in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most Americans lived in small towns and rural areas.

In 1902, she urged that the Seventh-day Adventist denomination build its institutions for publication of Christian literature or education of Christian young people outside of the cities. She believed that plan would offer the best opportunity for families with children to serve such institutions who might otherwise not be prepared to live in the city. She urged, however, that families serving these institutions not abandon witness to the city. “Repeatedly the Lord has instructed us that we are to work the cities from outpost centers. In these cities we are to have houses of worship, as memorials for God; but institutions for the publication of our literature, for the healing of the sick, and for the training

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Flee the city?

Many sincere and dedicated Christians embrace warnings regarding the dangers of living in the city. The reasons for the admonition to keep a distance from the city fall into three definitions. One is a concern with the visibility and availability of evil in the culture of a city. Second, a concern for raising children in the urban context. Third, the challenge of enduring the emotional and even physical assaults of sin as the culture becomes increasingly evil.

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of workers, are to be established outside the cities." She frequently advocated such "outposts" to the city.

As do many Christian leaders, Ellen White emphasized the danger of sinful influences that are obviously more apparent in the dense population of a city. Again, in this context, she voiced concern for children: "It is a mistake to call families into the city, where children and youth breathe an atmosphere of corruption and crime, sin and violence, intemperance and ungodliness. Oh, it is a terrible mistake to allow children to come in contact with that which makes such a fearful impression on their senses. Children and youth cannot be too fully guarded from familiarity with the pictures of iniquity as common as in all large cities."4

Ellen White also addressed the loss of the availability of lessons from nature in the education of children in the city. "It seems cruel to establish our schools in the cities, where the students are prevented from learning the precious lessons taught by nature."5

There is, if her original intent is misunderstood, an apparent contradiction in her admonition, because Ellen White also counseled Christians to live in the city: "We all need to be wide awake, that, as the way opens, we may advance the work in the large cities. We are far behind in following the light given to enter these cities and erect memorials for God. . . . And we are to continue the work until a church is organized and a humble house of worship built."6

Obviously, if Ellen White envisioned church buildings in the city for disciples of Jesus to gather in for worship, she intended for disciples to be living in the cities who would use those buildings for weekly worship. Her counsel to Adventist Christians did not advocate abandonment of the city.

In later years of her ministry, Ellen White urged disciples to enter the city and live and serve in that context. In 1910 she wrote:

"The Lord is calling upon the men and women who have the light of truth for this time to engage in genuine, personal missionary work. Especially are the church members living in the cities to exercise, in all humility, their God-given talents in laboring with those who are willing to hear the message that should come to the world at this time. There are great blessings in store for those who fully surrender to the call of God. As such workers undertake to win souls for Jesus, they will find that many who never could be reached in any other way will respond to intelligent personal effort."7

Her counsel to Christians goes beyond a reluctant acknowledgement that churches are needed in the city. She may have been foreseeing the migration of people to urban areas and the subsequent need for mission in the city. In 1912, she urged that the church support those members planting churches in urban areas: "Let us thank the Lord that there are a few laborers doing everything possible to raise up some memorials for God in our neglected cities. Let us remember that it is our duty to give these workers encouragement. God is displeased with the lack of appreciation and support shown our faithful workers in our large cities by His people in our own land."8

Are these contradictions to her earlier counsel? No. Not everyone is called in their family context or Christian vocation to live in an urban context. Some live for Christ in smaller towns or rural areas. Not everyone should feel they must move to a city.

The challenge of raising children in the city is a serious one. In our time there are areas of our large cities set aside for nature. It is interesting that children from rural areas take field trips to cities to see nature conservatories and to learn from museums. But the reverse is true as well. Rural life offers great advantages for raising children. Every Christian parent must prayerfully consider whether an urban setting is the right place for their family in those years when children are growing up in the home. At the same time, they must realize that those same children will likely migrate to a city to pursue their vocational life on maturity and must be prepared to withstand the visibility of sin.

Conclusion

God has called some disciples to enter into life in the city. The call is not intended for every disciple. He does not call anyone to a place where they cannot thrive or that would harm their children. Those who do answer the call must live an incarnational life for Jesus in the city and experience the encouragement and support of the church.

Christ needs disciples in the city. Clearly, the idea that Christians should not live in the city is contrary to God's will. Empowered by the Holy Spirit and strengthened with daily connection with Christ, those disciples who live in the city are able to advance God's will among the masses of people who now call the city home.

Some Christians reason that the end of earth's history is near, and thus they should leave the cities. But why would Christians abandon their mission to lead souls to Christ because the end is near? The gospel commission to go into all the world challenges disciples to mission in the city. "And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matt. 24:14).

1 All scriptural references are taken from the English Standard Version of the Bible.
5 Ibid., 186.