

A Biblical Theology of the City

by Dr. Tim Keller

As more and more people become city-dwellers it is imperative that the church understands how to reach out to the expanding cities of the 21st century. Here Tim Keller shares some biblical insights.

THE MEANING OF THE CITY

God designed the city with the power to draw out the resources of creation (of the natural order and the human soul) and thus to build civilisation.

A. God's invention

God's future redeemed world and universe is depicted as a 'city'. Abraham sought the city 'whose builder and maker is God' (Hebrews 11.10). Revelation 21 describes and depicts the apex of God's redemption, as a city! His redemption is building us a city - the new Jerusalem.

In fact, when we look at the New Jerusalem, we discover something strange. In the midst of the city is a crystal river, and on each side of the river is the Tree of Life, bearing fruit and leaves which heal the nations of all their wounds and the effects of the divine covenant curse. This city is the Garden of Eden, remade. The City is the fulfilment of the purposes of the Eden of God. We began in a garden but will end in a city; God's purpose for humanity is urban! Why? So the city is God's invention and design, not just a sociological phenomenon or invention of humankind.

B. Why cities develop culture

'The city is not to be regarded as an evil invention of ungodly fallen man... The ultimate goal set before humanity at the very beginning was that human-culture should take city-form... there should be an urban structuring of human historical existence... The cultural mandate given at creation was a mandate to build the city. Now, after the fall, the city is still a benefit, serving humankind as refuge from the howling wilderness condition into which the fallen human race, exiled from paradise, has been driven... The common grace city has remedial benefits even in a fallen world. It becomes the drawing together of resources, strength and talent no longer just for mutual complementation in the task of developing the resources of the created world, but now a pooling of power for defence against attack, and as an administrative community of welfare for the relief of those destitute by reason of the cursing of the ground' (Meredith G. Kline, 'Kingdom Prologue').

It is widely understood that when God tells Adam and Eve to 'have dominion' and 'fill the earth' he is directing them to build a God-honouring civilisation. They are to bring forth the riches that God put into creation by developing science, art, architecture, human society. Kline reveals, however, that since Revelation reveals that the 'end' of creation (the climax of the work of the 'Second Adam' Jesus Christ) is a city - that therefore God was calling Adam and Eve to be city builders. City building is an ordinance of God just like work and marriage. And indeed, cities

draw together human talent and resources and tap the human potential for cultural development as nothing else does.

There is no absolute way to define a 'city'. A human settlement becomes more 'urban' as it becomes more a) dense and b) diverse in its population. God made the city to be a developmental tool, a form of cultural 'gardening', designed to draw out the riches he put into the earth, nature and the human soul at creation. Even after the fall, cities are places of 'common grace' though each factor also now can be used (and is!) for evil purposes.

C. How it does it

1. First, the city (as the Garden) is a place of refuge and safety.

It has always been a place where people come who are too weak to live in other places. In the earliest days, cities provided refuge from wild animals and marauding tribes and criminals. When Israel moved into the promised land, the first cities were built by God's direction as 'cities of refuge', where the accused person could flee for safety and civil justice. Thus God invented cities to be a sign of divine, not self, protection. Even today, people like the homeless, or new immigrants, or the poor, or people with 'deviant' lifestyles, must live in the city. The city is always a more merciful place for minorities of all kinds. Why? The density of the city creates the possibility of strong minority communities. Density creates diversity. The dominant majorities often dislike cities, but the weak and powerless need them. They cannot survive in the suburbs and small towns. Cain built his cities for self-protection from God and the vengeance of others. So the refuge of the city can be misused, as when people with sinful lifestyles find refuge in the city from the disapproval of the broader culture.

Practical note: It is hard for middle-class families to live in the cities, and thus the cities are seen as hostile places. But for anyone who is not part of the dominant culture (singles, the poor, ethnic minorities, etc.) the city has great advantages over non-urban areas.

2. Second, the city as a cultural mining/development centre.

Even the description of the wicked city of Babylon shows the power of the city to draw out the resources of creation - of the physical world and the human soul. In Revelation 18 we see that the city is a place of 1) music and the arts (v.22a), 2) crafts and works of all arts and manufacturing (v.22b), 3) trade and retailing (v.23c), 4) technological advance (v.23a), 5) family building (v.23b). This is what the city was designed by God to do, as an instrument of glorifying him by 'mining' the riches of creation and building a God-honouring civilisation.

Practical note: The city, then, has a powerful magnifying glass effect. Since God invented it as a 'cultural mine', it brings out whatever is in the human heart. Why? The density and therefore diversity of the city brings out the best (and the worst - see below) in the human heart. How does it do so? The divinely-given ability of the city to do 'culture-making' can be discerned at the most practical level by the urban resident.

* The city puts me together with unique numbers of people unlike me.

* The city attracts the minorities of any society who can band together for mutual support. Thus the city is deeply merciful to those with less power, creating safe enclaves for singles vs. families, the poor (and even the rich!) vs. the bourgeois, immigrants vs. longer-term residents, racial minorities vs. majorities. Thus the city will always be the most diverse human-life structure.

* Because I am put together (by its density) with unique numbers of diverse people, all my thinking and views are radically challenged. I am confronted with creative new ways to think about things, and I must abandon my traditional ways or become far more knowledgeable and committed to them than I was before. Thus I become vastly more creative, committed, skilful in all I am or do.

* Sin takes this divine-strength - the diversity of the city - and turns it into a place of conflict and strife. The gospel is needed to resist the dark side of this gift.

* The city puts me together with unique numbers of people like me.

* The city also attracts the strongest as well as the weakest (see above). The challenge of the city attracts the most talented, ambitious (and restless, see below). Thus, whoever you are, when you come to the city you are confronted by far more people who are far better than you at whatever you do.

* Because I am put together with unique numbers of like-but-extremely-skilled people in my field, I am radically challenged to 'reach down deep' and do my very best. More than that, I feel driven and pressed by the intensity of the density to realise every ounce of my potential.

* Sin takes this divine strength - the culture-forming intensity - and turns it into a place (also) of both deadly hubris and burn-out. The gospel is needed to resist the dark side of this gift.

Cities draw and gather together human resources and tap their potential for cultural development as no other human-life organisation structure can.

It is quite wrong to see the city as intrinsically evil! It was designed by God to 'draw out' and to 'mine' what God made. We should appreciate the power of the city and realise that the tremendous evil has been brought to it by us!

3. Third, the city as the place to meet God.

Ancient cities were religious institutions. They were usually built around a 'ziggurat' - the original skyscrapers! They were temples where a particular god was thought to 'come down'. The cities were seen to be the royal residences of the god, and the city was dedicated to him/her. The city was where the cultus for that god was centred, and where you went if you wanted to serve him or her. All of this was probably a twisted 'memory trace' of the original design of God, that the Edenic city, the new Jerusalem, would be the place where people would meet him, where his temple/presence would be.

After Eden was lost to us (temporarily) through sin, God creates a new city in the desert, by dwelling among his people in the tabernacle, and around his Tent is a city of tents. The city of God will be his dwelling place. Later, the earthly city of Jerusalem becomes a symbol and sign to the future city of God. In the earthly Jerusalem, God's dwelling place, the temple, stands as the central integrating point of the city's architecture and as apex of its art and science and technology. As a result, Jerusalem is 'the joy of the whole earth' (Psalm 48.2). But she is only a sign of the city of God which is heavenly and which is to come. All true believers even now have as their mother, 'the Jerusalem that is above, is free' (Galatians 4.26).

Why are cities always 'religious hotbeds' where people are spiritually seeking and restless? The density and diversity of the city - the same dynamics that produce cultural development - also keep people spiritually 'off balance' and restless. Cities, therefore, are the key to evangelism in any area. Paul's missionary journeys essentially ignored the countryside. When he entered a new region, he planted churches in the biggest city, and then left!

* Why? The reason for ministry in cities mirrors what we've seen about the nature of cities.

* Cultural cruciality. In the village, you might win the one or two lawyers to Christ, but if you wanted to win the legal profession, you need to go to the city where you have the law schools, the law journals published, etc.

* Global cruciality. In the village, you can win only the single people group that is there, but if you want to spread the gospel into 10-20 new national groups and languages at once, you go to the city where they can all be reached through the lingua franca of the place.

* Personal cruciality. In the village little changes and people live in very stable environments. Thus they are suspicious of any major change. Because of the diversity and intensity of the cities, urbanites are much more open to radically new ideas - like the gospel! Because they are surrounded by so many people like and unlike themselves (see above), and so much more mobile and subject to change, urbanites are far more open to change/conversion than any other kind of resident. They may have moved to the city out of a searching restlessness. But even if not, once they get to the city, the pressure and diversity makes even the most traditional and hostile people open to the gospel.

* Result? By year 300 AD, 50% of the urban populations of the Roman empire were Christian, while over 90% of the countryside was still pagan. (Note: Some believe that the very word 'pagan' comes from the Greek paganus meaning a farmer or man of the country.) Because Christianity captured the cities, it eventually captured the society, as must always be the case. What captivates the cities also captivates the arts, media, scholarship and the professions. Cities are the 'culture-forming wombs' of the society, made by God to be so.

D. How sin breaks the city

1. The diversity of the city under sin creates a place of racism, classism, and violence. Also the city becomes a refuge, not from the wilderness or persecution, but from God and his law.

For example, people have gone to the cities to engage in sexual practices that are proscribed by many places in society, but the natural 'tolerance of diversity' that cities inherently have is

twisted into a place where 'anything goes'. People go to the city to create their own moralities. Second, while cities still do attract and sustain enormous race and cultural diversity, human sin makes cities places of constant racial strife, class warfare, crime and violence. This can be seen perfectly in Genesis 11 and Babel. The Babel-builders specifically sought to build a city that would gather people for their own glory (see below). (Many scholars believe that, since Genesis 9 and 10 indicates God wanted human spread and cultural differentiation, Babel may have actually been built in resistance to cultural diversity. See Vos.) In any case, the result of the sin of Babel is confusion. People cannot communicate. Any human effort at unity based on common defiance of God resulted in fragmentation and greater disunity. So today, cities built on human defiance of God and for 'making a name' for the human builders find enormous strife and confusion and violence between diverse groups of people.

Practical note: Many people hate cities because of the diversity of cultures, people 'not like us', but we see that God enjoys and wills the diversity of cultures as bringing forth the richness of his creation. Christians should rejoice and enjoy diversity of cultures, recognising that they all stand judged by God's Word.

2. The cultural-development power of the city under sin creates a place of pride, arrogance, excess, over-work, and exhaustion.

The quintessential City of Rebellion is Babel. 'Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth' (Genesis 11.4).

The first skyscraper is built in clear defiance of God. The original mandate of God to humankind was to be 'miners' of all the riches of creation. They were to turn to the natural resources of the physical universe and the personal resources of their own creation in the image of God. They were thus to be culture builders, developing science and art and civic life, building civilisation that glorified God as its source and ground. Now we have a city dedicated to 'mining cultural riches' for human glorification and to show its independence of God.

Since the human heart is made in the image of God and is totally depraved, therefore the city brings out the very, very best and worst of human capabilities. Adam would have developed a city of God and all the potentialities of creation (physical nature and human spirit) would have been untainted and thus the city would be glorious. Today, however, art and science and technology and education serve to both bring out the best and worst. We can all feel it. Nothing challenges and presses you to excellence like the city. But nothing drives you to reach down deep and do well. In sin that all becomes tainted and idolatrous and exhausting, of course. The purpose of the City of Rebellion is 'to make a name for ourselves'. This is still a deep drive and engine in the building of any human city. It is a spirituality of darkness of enormous force, it is a motivation moving many or most people who move toward the city.

3. The spiritual restlessness of the city under sin makes the city a hotbed of cults and false belief.

Cities are always the hotbed of religious cults. They are inveterately religious. Every city is dedicated to a god - even if it is the secular 'religion'. In cities, ordinarily, the Christian churches can be found with the best ministries, theological resources, churches, etc. Until recently, that is.

Protestant Christians abandoning the city inevitably make it easier for the city to turn to false gods. Because God invented cities to be religious centres, human idolatries are enhanced in the city. It is not surprising that cities were the places in which the 'new' ideas of the Enlightenment first took place and where irreligion first became rampant in Western society. Cities are always places that are 'ahead of the curve'. But it stands to reason that these would be the first places where secular people who are steeped in the unbelief of their culture would be the most open to Christianity as a new idea. Cities would be the place where any new vision of Christianity would take shape and begin to capture the culture's imagination again.

Summary

* Reach the city to reach the culture. Protestant (evangelical) Christians are the least urban religious group and thus have the least impact culturally. Three kinds of people here affect the future: a) elites, b) new immigrants, c) the poor. The single most effective way for Christians to 'reach' the US would be for 25% of them to move to two or three of the largest cities and stay there for three generations.

* Reach the city to reach your region and the world. a) Region. You can't reach the city from the suburbs, but can reach all the metro area from the city. b) World. The return of the 'city-state'. The cities of the world are now linked more to one another than to their own states and countries. Each major city is a 'portal' to the other major cities of the world.

* Reach the city to reach your own heart with the gospel.

* In the city you'll find a) people that seem 'hopeless' spiritually, and b) people of other religions or no religion and of deeply non-Christian lifestyles that are wiser, kinder, and deeper than you. This will shock you out of your moralism and force you to either finally believe the gospel of sheer grace, or give it up altogether. You may get top marks on justification by faith alone, but functionally, believe salvation by works. The city will show this to you as nothing else will.

* In the city you will find that the poor and the broken are often much, much more open to the idea of gospel grace and much more dedicated to its practical outworkings than you are.

* You should eventually come to see that you need the city more than the city needs you.

HOW TO LIVE IN THE CITY

A. Models of life in the city

In every earthly city, there are two 'kingdoms' present, two 'cities' vying for control. They are the City of Baal (or Satan or the god of this world) and the City of God.

* The city of Satan deifies power and wealth and human culture itself (making art, technology, business an end in itself instead of a way of glorifying God).

* The city of God is marked by God shalom (Jeru-shalom) - his peace. His peace is a place where stewardship of God, creation, justice, compassion and righteousness lead to harmony and family building and cultural development under God.

* Christians are to see the earthly city as something to love and win. They are to win it by seeking its shalom (Jeremiah 29) and seeking to spread the city of God within it, and to battle the city of Satan within it.

* We are to see that, though the fight between these two kingdoms happens everywhere in the world, earthly cities are the flashpoints on the battlelines, the places where the fighting is most intense, where the war can be won.

Models of urban ministry are then:

We despise the city. Church as fortress. (Forgetting the city as Jerusalem).

We are the city. Church as mirror. (Forgetting the city as Babylon).

We use the city. Church as space capsule. (Forgetting the city as battleground).

We love the city. Church as leaven. Jeremiah 29.

Any theological model of the city will fail if one or more of these three biblical themes of the city is neglected, omitted, or over-emphasised.

B. Basic methods/ministries

* **WORD** (Ezra). Ezra recovered the Word for the people. Preaching, discipling, teaching, evangelising in a way contextualised to the concerns and capacities of the people of the city.

* **DEED** (Nehemiah). Nehemiah made the city safe and functional. Mercy and Justice! Holistic ministry. Safe streets, good jobs, decent housing, good schools.

* **WORK** (Esther). Esther rose high in a pagan society but then used her position at great risk to work for justice in society and for her people. A key part of city ministry is to equip Christians to work distinctively as Christians in their vocation.

* **COMMUNITY** (Jeremiah). Jeremiah's letter (chapter 29) told the exiles to neither assimilate nor separate but live out their lives as a community 'seeking the peace of the city'. So we are not only to be 'witnesses' by our individual lives, but by the beauty of our communal life. a) Generosity with money and simplicity of life, b) races and classes loving together over barriers, c) sexual purity and respect shown by men/women to one another in relationships.

C. Getting the power

Jesus went down to the city, and was crucified 'outside the gate': sent into howling wilderness, the biblical metaphor for forsakeness - losing the city! Jesus lost the city that was, so we can be citizens of the city to come, making us salt and light in the city that is! Our citizenship in the City-to-come, by his grace, equips us for the city that is.