

**Book Review: *The Urbanity of the Bible* by Sean Benesh**

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### **Author's Purpose**

*The Urbanity of the Bible*, written by Dr. Sean Benesh, is part of a series that addresses the issues involving the orthodoxy and orthopraxy of urban ministry and urban mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Dr. Benesh endeavors to demonstrate that urbanization in today's cities is part of God's redemptive plan (*missio Dei*) to produce disciples made in His image and likeness through a theology of the city that is not gospel-centered and contextual; not confined to the four walls of a church building in order to usher in God's Kingdom to transform peoples, cultures, cities and the world. In addition, Dr. Benesh desires to introduce, or rather reintroduce underlying themes of urbanity located within the pages of scripture.

### **Urban Social Analysis**

Dr. Benesh's social analysis targets cities and highlights the fact that more than 50% of the world's population live in cities with North America boasting an 80% population rate (Benesh 2015, 20). Dr. Benesh believes cities are places that exist within the realms of both the kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light where Christian believers are to minister to their neighbors and employ both the Greatest Commandment (love the Lord your God and your neighbor as yourself) and the Great Commission (making disciples of all nations). This dual nature of cities is a constant tension for the Christian who sees both "vibrancy and decay, prosperity and abject poverty, beauty and ashes" all in the same place and space (Benesh 2015, 60). Our target audience is contextual based on the demographics of our neighborhood and communities.

We need to understand too that cities are fluid and transient – a "moving target" where the church embodies both saving grace and common grace (Benesh 2015, 170). This saving grace is not limited to the heart transformation of a person, but has the potential to infiltrate its

environment for the common good to bring forth transformation, restoration, and renewal to cities. Dr. Benesh drives home the point that the gospel addresses not only spiritual consequences of sin, but social, economic, systemic and environmental consequences as well (Benesh 2015, 63). “For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God” (Romans 8:19).

### **Urban Theological Reflection and Formation**

Dr. Benesh tackles the erroneous assumption that the Bible presents a rural theological lens with an anti-urban bias. He states that we must acknowledge the challenges our own experiences and worldviews bring to the table when we analyze the Bible; being careful that we may have to leave our preconceived notions and presuppositions aside in order to approach the scriptures free of biases.

In Genesis, he makes the case that humanity was not made to be confined solely to the Garden of Eden because of God’s mandate to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth (Genesis 1: 28). So, there is an implicit assumption that human beings are to build, create and expand their territory beyond the garden. This theme of multiplication is part of God’s original design for mankind and is a marker of urban development, and is later repeated in the story of Abraham (Benesh 2015, 52).

Dr. Benesh believes the urbanity of the Bible is attributed to a triune God (God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit). The Trinity is intrinsically communal enjoying love, fellowship, friendship, and “geographic proximity” (Benesh 2015, 26) and is an “eternal community of oneness” (Benesh 2015, 27). The relational and communal attributes of God are indicative of what human community should be. Proximity, therefore, is essential to the foundation of cities. Dr. Benesh draws out from the creation story in Genesis 2:18 the fact that

there were many things God created as “good,” yet the only circumstance that was “not good” was Adam’s solitary life. He did not have a helper suitable for him and it was not found in the animals. Thus, God created Eve in line with His nature of community and relationship. American professor, Gilbert Bilezikian said it perfectly when he said, “Since God is Trinity, he is plurality of oneness. Therefore, the creation...required the creation of plurality of persons” (Benesh 2015, 28).

In the book of Revelation, the new heaven is referred to as the “new Jerusalem” or “Holy City” (Rev 21:2, NIV), which is in contrast to the creation narrative. God’s ultimate goal for Adam and Eve was to expand the borders of the garden into wider territory to form cities and nations. Dr. Benesh also highlights that the covenant between God and Abraham included making Abraham the father of many nations (Genesis 17:5) whose decedents would be as numerous as the stars in the sky (Genesis 15:5). God imparted to Abraham “managerial responsibility” in stewarding his offspring (Benesh 2015, 53). According to Christian apologist, Tim Keller, “Israel was to be the exhibition place for God’s redemptive grace in the city and the empires that formed around God’s people in history” (Benesh 2015, 103). Israel’s original mission was to reflect their covenant relationship with God to the nations, yet through idolatry they forfeited their calling. Their rebellion was passed along to subsequent generations mentioned throughout the Old Testament with the repetitive descriptor of kings who “did evil in the eyes of the Lord.”

Jesus lived during the highly urbanized Roman Empire which allowed for religious, political, military and cultural institutions including businesses, cultural centers, temples and synagogues within its provinces and cities. Though Jesus said a prophet is not welcome in his own hometown, He still wept for Jerusalem. His heart went out to His beloved city. Dr. Benesh

reports Colin Brown's findings on the Greek translation of Jesus' lamenting and weeping, which is the word *teknon* which describes a deep longing and relationship between a child and his parents (Benesh 2015, 131). After Jesus' ascension, He left the responsibility of discipleship to His followers who met in an upper room for the baptism of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2 evidenced by the group speaking in various known tongues as a catalyst for a multiethnic church birthed out of Jerusalem. As urban missiologist, Ray Bakke notes, "Acts 2 reports the first hours of the church's existence as being both international and multilingual" (Benesh 2015, 137) solidifying God's heart for the nations.

### **Urban Theological Implementation & Approach**

Dr. Benesh believes in an ideal city where Christians practice radical discipleship and covenant community between ourselves, God and others based on the sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-6 (Benesh 2015, 119). The *missio Dei* informs the approach of the church, which seeks the welfare of the city across social classes through God's common and saving grace for the redemption of urban cities and its people (Benesh 2015, 185). It's important in urban ministry and urban church planting to analyze the geographical area to understand why people live in a certain area. The first-century church congregating primarily in homes is more descriptive than prescriptive. It would be faulty for us to apply this model across all cultural and ethnic societies since it may not be conducive to a culture (Benesh 2015, 164). A holistic framework that takes into account the societal norms and dynamics of city life presents the gospel in a way that is relevant without compromising the foundational doctrines of the faith.

### **Student Impressions**

I deeply appreciated Dr. Benesh's theological reflections on the urbanity of the Bible, especially as it pertained to the communal attributes of the Trinity and the tension between the

kingdom of darkness and the kingdom of light inherent in cities. It never occurred to me that God (though understanding Him to be three in one) is the foundation of all community and fellowship. I thought it to be more of a by-product of the creation of humanity. Yet it makes sense in my mind that we were made in God's image and likeness and cannot help but draw together. I don't believe it's an accident that the world is becoming increasingly urbanized and globalized. It is Satan who seeks to bring division, strife, isolation, and discord among human beings. He knows that when we know dwell together in unity that we are an unstoppable force.

## **Bibliography**

Benesh, Sean. *The Nuts and Bolts of Church The Urbanity of the Bible: Rediscovering the Urban Nature of the Bible*. Portland, Oregon: Urban Loft Publishers, 2015.