

Book Review:

Reaching the New Jerusalem: A Biblical and Theological Framework for the City

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Main Point and Purpose

Through a collection of essays and case studies, this book explores the theological foundations of doing missions in cities and how we can respond to various social realities in a biblical way. It argues that even though the world started with the Garden of Eden, the trajectory of God's redemptive story ultimately leads to an eternal, holy city where shalom exists – the New Jerusalem. While the Kingdom is here, it is also not yet, so cities remain imperfect places in dire need of restoration, where followers of Jesus, as “citizens of the New Jerusalem...ought to be in the vanguard of voices and actors in re-visioning and reenacting cities of our present societies” (Borgman 2013, 151). Amid the predominant worldview that cities are fearful and dangerous places, our task is to partner with God in transforming our urban realities into sanctuaries of safety and refuge.

Social Analysis of the Target Urban Context

The book examines a wide range of urban issues, including caring for the poor, combating consumer culture, and prioritizing education in immigration churches. Prior to engineering solutions on how to serve our communities, we must dedicate time to executing a “current state analysis” to determine key priorities for our ministries (Runyon 2013, 75). In fact, this is exactly what Nehemiah did before he publicly addressed the Israelites on his plan for rebuilding the temple and city walls – he did the groundwork of researching the city's present state to gain insight and credibility (Neh 2:11-16).

One such modern-day example is figuring out how to minister to the poor and marginalized; an important first step is to pose tough questions and hear firsthand stories from people on the underside. Beyond qualitative research, studying macro factors like “relativity of wealth, social opportunity, and social status” can shed light on how they're interrelated to issues that plague the poor: “crime, violence...mental illness, teenage births, and educational failure” (Borgman 2013, 144-145). Only through an honest assessment of reality – via listening to personal accounts and identifying systemic and structural issues –

can we “begin to comprehend the dilemma of systemic disadvantage and discrimination” (Borgman 2013, 151). In a similar vein, if the topic is about the evils of U.S. consumerism, a social analysis might include studying the environmental impact of commercialization, economic inequality, and globalization. Certainly, undergirding the entire process of social analysis is the constant process of challenging our faulty mental models and prejudices, repenting of them, and “finding new ones that line up with the greater reality of God’s truth” – this enables us to see reality as it truly is (Hall et al. 2013, 176).

Urban Theological Reflection and Formation

The New Jerusalem is depicted in Revelation 21 as a radiant and pure city, “the fulfillment of all God’s promises, and the end of all banishment and all human suffering” (Spencer 2013, 32). Sadly, due to the Fall, cities have become tainted with sin, exploitation, and disparity, but God had always ordained cities as places of safety and refuge that would defend the poor and powerless (Num 35:6-15, Isa 1:21). In fact, during Jesus’ ministry in Matthew 5:14, he used the metaphors of being the “light of the world” and a “city on a hill” to illustrate how the Christian community should be – influencing the wider culture, setting standards of righteousness, and drawing people towards enlightenment and healing.

Since “the city serves as holy ground where people meet God,” Jesus sought to minister in towns and cities to teach about the Kingdom of God and offer glimpses of the New Jerusalem, healing the sick, casting out demons, and raising the dead to life (Spencer 2013, 29). Paul also focused his missionary work in cities with complex networks, because “he saw the city as an organism strategically designed by God that could, by its living, dynamic design, help extend the work of the kingdom of God” (Hall et al. 2013, 163). As followers of Jesus, we too must seek out areas of brokenness in the cities we live in and bring forth redemption, peace, and healing where it is needed.

One key biblical theme of the New Jerusalem is intercultural unity and diversity. As per Revelation 7:9, the citizens of the New Jerusalem will be a great multitude from countless

nations and tribes, speaking various languages. The Kingdom of God will celebrate people of all ethnicities and cultural backgrounds. The corresponding principle, thus, is to reconcile any barriers to intercultural unity among the church and in our cities. Jesus modeled for us how to “[bridge] the gap of segregation and [bring] peace and reconciliation” when he initiated a conversation with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4 and chose to publicly reveal his identity as the Messiah to an outcast and an enemy of the Israelites at the time (Duemling 2013, 195). Fighting for intercultural unity will serve as a witness to a watching world.

Another biblical theme is sacrificial hospitality. Firstly, the incarnation of Jesus was a deeply selfless and compassionate decision to “endure slander, abuse, torture, execution, and relegation by his created ones...to invite those very ones into his perfect world” (Anderson 2013, 281). It was a sacrifice for the betterment of others. Furthermore, the attributes of God as a God of love, grace, mercy, goodness, and justice serve as the foundation for how the body of Christ should care for others. The resulting principle is to joyfully exercise radical generosity and steward God’s resources well for the sake of unity.

Theological Implementation Approach and Practice

To foster intercultural unity, the church can respond by combating racial, ethnic, and cultural barriers to cross-cultural partnerships. This means facing conflict head-on, dialoguing with one another, storytelling, and providing opportunities for immersion in a safe learning environment. As for practical next steps for exercising sacrificial hospitality, this might involve inviting an immigrant group to share or rent the church’s space and resources, such as furniture or technology, or even envisioning the church building as a homeless shelter. Moreover, to encourage unity, we are to welcome collaboration with our co-laborers in Christ across the globe, who can expose cultural and spiritual blind spots and deepen our understanding of the gospel. While our approaches will vary based on our unique social analysis and faith reflection, as Christians, our shared calling is to be salt and light and “assist God in reconciling the world and creating a New Jerusalem in the city” (Spencer 2013, 42).

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