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UR510: Urban Theology

Theological Paper

March 23, 2023

The writer is responsible for a twelve-page urban theological paper from lectures, class discussions, biblical principles, readings, and course assignments. The goal is to select a specific urban community and focal group for the paper, throughout the paper demonstrating an understanding of that community's needs and a response to the needs of that community and focal group. Four requirements must be met:

1. Describe the chosen urban community and focal group, including their social, cultural, economic, and religious issues.
2. Describe a biblical, theological framework that responds to the specific needs and issues of the target urban context and focal group, including concrete biblical and theological support, drawing from both the OT and NT, class discussions, and individual research.
3. Note any social compassion, ethical, and justice issues considered in developing a theology for the chosen urban context.
4. Present at least two concrete applications of urban theology that respond to the needs and issues of the target urban context and focal group, including a description of the community-based ministries and activities used for these applications.

Now that we understand the parameters of the assignment. Let's begin!

Segregation in Long Island has become an issue in the African American community, creating a racial and social fracture within Nassau County. Additionally, within this paper, we will learn that the intentional separation of African Americans from white communities has created a sub-fracture of homelessness within Nassau County. Throughout the paper, we get an overview of the problem and review statistics that share how segregation leads to homelessness and how both affect the wonderful Nassau County community. Now that we know the overview of the discussion. Let's begin.

## **1. FOCAL GROUP**

### ISSUES AFRICAN AMERICANS FACE IN LONG ISLAND

#### ***BLACK HOMELESSNESS IN LONG ISLAND***

God has laid a concern on the writer's heart for African American homeless in Freeport, NY—a city in Long Island. According to statistics from the United States Census, Freeport has a total population of 44,199 people; of those people, 31.2% are African American.<sup>1</sup> As an American citizen, it is not uncommon to see homelessness at some point in our commute to or from work. But how does homelessness affect you and me? The short answer is in our pockets.

According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, a person experiencing chronic homelessness costs the taxpayer an average of \$35,000 yearly (2016).<sup>2</sup> People don't become homeless by accident; they do so because of the unaffordability of housing, lack of job opportunities, and lack of social safety nets.<sup>3</sup> In 2019 there were 3,843 homeless people in

<sup>1</sup> “Quick Facts Freeport Village,” United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/freeportvillagenewyork/PST045222>.

<sup>2</sup> “What is the Cost of Homelessness?,” Father Joe’s Villages, Publishing Organization, Published on Mar 8, 2022, <https://my.neighbor.org/what-is-the-cost-of-homelessness/>.

<sup>3</sup> “What is the Cost of Homelessness?,” Father Joe’s Villages, Publishing Organization, Published on Mar 8, 2022, <https://my.neighbor.org/what-is-the-cost-of-homelessness/>.

Nassau County, of which 30.2% are unsheltered, and 69.8% have shelter.<sup>4</sup> Homelessness is a problem everywhere in the United States that requires everyone to pitch in to resolve the issue. In 2021, the U.S. federal government enacted over \$51 billion in funding for selected homelessness and housing programs—which does not include city, county, or private dollars invested in homelessness and affordable housing. Even with these resources pooled annually, it still does not resolve homelessness in our great nation or its cities.

### ***SEGREGATION***

Long Island has 291 communities and most of its black residents live in just 11 of the possible 291 communities.<sup>5</sup> The concentrated housing pattern ranks described above make Long Island near the top of nationally ranked statistical analyses of segregation.<sup>6</sup> Based on this article from Newsday, the poverty affecting African American in Long Island can be seen as constructed due to segregation. This tactic began when whites did not want blacks to live near them and enforced laws to keep them from living near each other. We can deduce that the effects of those laws, and others such as Jim Crow, negatively affected African Americans long after the laws were removed. However, here are the facts after the U.S. The Supreme Court invalidated racial covenants in 1948; discriminatory practices continued until April 1968, six days after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., when many companies announced they would adopt policies of “open housing” as a memorial to King.<sup>7</sup>

Here is a short explanation or summary of how it came to this:

<sup>4</sup> “HOMELESSNESS STATISTICS FOR NASSAU, NY,” HOMELESSSHELTERSDIRECTORY, <https://www.homelesshelterdirectory.org/county/ny-nassau>.

<sup>5</sup> Olivia Winslow, “DIVIDING LINES, VISIBLE AND INVISIBLE,” [projects.newsday.com](https://projects.newsday.com), Newsday, Nov. 17, 2019, <https://projects.newsday.com/long-island/segregation-real-estate-history/>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

“There are two ways real estate abuse take place one is visibly like there being a bridge that separates/segregates both parties and the other is invisible products like zoning regulations, mortgage redlining, the boundaries of 124 school districts, housing prices, and racial steering and blockbusting — a tactic used by real estate agents to drive up sales, and commissions, by inducing blacks to move into a white neighborhood and then warning whites that property values were about to plummet.”<sup>8</sup>

Practices like the ones mentioned above were not accidentally created. These practices were only done with the knowledge of the damage they would cause during the era they were created. However, even after those laws and practices have been abolished, the ripple effects are still felt and continue to make waves long after their creation. Now that we covered the focal group that positioned the discussion on segregation that creates homelessness in Freeport, NY, we will now move on to discuss what the bible says about homelessness and the writer's spiritual thoughts on segregation based on what the bible says. Okay, let's begin to discuss the biblical and theological framework of segregation and homelessness.

## **2. BIBLICAL & THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK**

So what does the Bible say about segregation? Good question! Let's take a look at Matthew 12:25. At this particular point in the book of Matthew, it talks about Jesus' perspective on segregation, saying: Jesus knew their thoughts and said to them, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand (NIV). So what does this mean? Well, it says in plain language that every city or household

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

divided against itself will not stand, and segregation is a literal manifestation of one race or class of people being physically separated from another.

Although we need more biblical evidence to make a solid conclusion, we can agree that the biblical perspective or framework is clear. When Jesus said, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand; it means relationships between the segregated groups block the ability for segregated groups to function properly, and their dysfunctional relationship will not last in the long run. Why? Mark 3:25 says it best, “If a house is divided against itself, it cannot stand.” These groups live amongst each other within Nassau County and must function in social, political, familial, ecclesiastical, and vocational settings. According to the U.S. Census, Nassau county is only 284.7 square miles of land. To put this into perspective, 1,395,774 fit into 284 square miles. So without the ability for African Americans to feel equal, there will be an awkwardness that divides white people from black people forming a social divide that will have an outcome that affects both people groups.

Job 5:15-17 says, “He saves the needy from the sword in their mouth; he saves them from the clutches of the powerful. So the poor have hope, and injustice shuts its mouth.” This Old Testament scripture, in two parts, expresses Christian's obligations to save the needy from the plight that immediately impacts their life when it says we are to “save the needy from the sword in their mouth.” In this case, the sword is homelessness. Homeless people are desperate, impoverished, lacking, and in need of basic necessities. That is a sword in the throat. Not having a bed to sleep in or a roof over your head. Eating out of trash cans because you do not know where your next meal is coming from. Begging others for money, food, clothes, or transportation. All this is happening within the homeless community in Freeport, NY.

The second part of the scripture talks about what happens after Christians remove the sword in the needy's mouth, which supplies the poor with hope and closes the mouth of injustice biting the poor. In other words, the actions of Christians that are directed toward the needy can change their lives. Could you imagine if Christ saw our needs and left us to deal with our problems on our own? Put another way, Christ saved us and looked at the foolish things we do and get ourselves into even though we are saved. Imagine the increased difficulty for those who are not saved and have no Savior or hope. We, Christians, need to do our part both in and out of church walls for our brothers and sisters who are in need, if for no other reason, as a thank you to Jesus for what He has done for us.

Here are two more scriptures that bring together our Christian Biblical Theology to help the poor. Proverbs 21:13 says, "Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered," and Proverbs 22:9 says, "The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor." These two scriptures go hand in hand because they play off one another. So when Proverbs says, "Whoever shuts their ears to the cry of the poor will also cry out and not be answered," we can view through the lens of those who are immune to what they see happening with the poor in Freeport, NY. What do you think happens when you neglect the poor? One reaction will be a crime. Poor people still need resources, and when they see those who have access to those resources, they will try to take advantage by asking for them or taking them without permission. However, scripture warns us that those who don't help will cry out, and it will not be answered. In this case, the white community members in Freeport, NY, will cry about poverty and homelessness in their community. Still, those cries will fall on deaf ears because those not participating in the resolution of ending homelessness receive the consequence of not doing more to resolve the problem.

Conversely, Proverbs 22:9 says, “The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.” Those who help the poor are blessed because they receive the gift of giving and the blessing of knowing they helped change the lives of others. Giving is its own reward. The idea of Christians sharing our food with the homeless can make us feel closer to Christ and help us realize we are becoming a better person through doing good, and isn't that the point of being a Christian?

Galatians 3:28 is another scripture that discusses segregation, saying, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (NIV) This scripture talks about the importance of everyone being treated equally. Why would this scripture take the time to say such a thing all those years ago? The answer is simple—man's desire to divide and conquer began at the beginning of time in the Garden of Eden, which is why division in the form of segregation exists today.

So what effect has segregation had on African Americans? As a result of segregation in Long Island, school districts are more segregated than they were four decades ago. For example, student bodies of 47 of Nassau's 56 school districts were less than 10 percent black in 1976, and the proportion of black students has risen above 10 percent in only nine of them.

Neighborhood barriers affect students because where you live (school district boundaries) can adversely impact children's educational opportunities. In other words, our children are designed by zip code. Due to segregation, African American children live in zip codes with smaller pocketbooks, and zip codes should not be used to draw educational funding lines. Said differently, a child's educational outcome should not be based on where they live, and Long Island is full of that.

From this point, we can see that the educational outcomes for young African Americans are at a disadvantage from the start of their lives. Now is an excellent time to create a hypothetical scenario describing what happened. Here is the scenario.

What do you think would happen if we were both running a marathon and when the whistle blew to start the race for the both of us to begin, I did not run, and you got a three-hour head start?

Who is going to be ahead for the duration of the race? You are. Who is going to win the race?

Most likely, you are. Last question. What would be the best outcome I could hope for? Would it be to win or finish the race? If you answered just finishing the race, then you are correct because finishing the race would be an accomplishment all on its own if you were that far behind.

This analogy is similar to what is happening for African Americans in Freeport, NY, in Nassau County. They are behind because they are segregated into specific areas that put them at a disadvantage educationally. This then puts them behind in getting a career that can compete with salaries that would take them out of the lower class, lower middle, and middle class and into the upper middle class and upper class. As it stands now, African Americans cannot compete for the best jobs in America or, in this case, Freeport, NY. This is the first domino that leads to African American homelessness.

Why? Because African American salaries are so low, they are paycheck to paycheck. If an emergency changes their financial lives, they are not equipped to stand the financial pressure of a financial crisis because they do not have emergency funds. So when a financial crisis hits, they use the resources they have at their disposal, but when they run out of money and resources, the result is homelessness. It is a sad cycle the writer knows all too well because he grew up in poverty and homelessness for a short time during his childhood and remembers it like it was yesterday. Homelessness can happen to anyone who is vulnerable financially or in health. How

so? If you cannot work, you cannot pay for your ability to live. Health is vital to sustaining oneself in the plight of homelessness.

### **3. HOW WAS THIS THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK CONSIDERED?**

The bible is littered with scripture that expresses how Christians are to treat those who are less fortunate than we are. In the book of Matthew it says, “Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Matthew 5:42).<sup>9</sup> Why would God say this to us? From this vantage point, it is clear—the Bible wants Christians to understand there is a responsibility for Christians to house the needs of people who do not have. In that same spirit, God expects His people to help the homeless and marginalized.

### **4. TWO CONCRETE APPLICATIONS THAT RESPOND TO THESE NEEDS**

We have come to understand two issues in Freeport, NY, that need a Christian response: African American homelessness and segregation. The writer would take a smorgasbord approach of using multiple successful options that have been documented to work successfully and apply them to remedy the issues in Freeport, NY. Here is how the writer would respond to Christian homelessness. Let us take a look at what he would do first.

#### ***Increasing the Supply of Affordable Housing***

New Jersey is committed to creating new affordable housing and has successfully created a strategy to fight homelessness using something they call the “fair share formula.” The strategy came from a Supreme Court ruling that made it illegal for any legal zoning ordinances that make it physically and economically impossible to provide low to moderate-income housing

<sup>9</sup> Arnold Rodriguez, “Homelessness and Social Justice - A Christian Perspective on Human Decency,” LinkedIn, March 14, 2020, <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/homelessness-social-justice-christian-perspective-human-rodriguez/>.

unconstitutional.<sup>10</sup> The ruling falls under a law called “Mount Laurel I & II” Mount Laurel II focuses on the fair share formula to measure each municipality’s obligation to provide affordable housing, as well as a “builder’s remedy” to force municipalities to fulfill that obligation.<sup>11</sup> As a result of the Mount Laurel decisions, New Jersey has built more affordable housing per capita in high-opportunity communities near good schools and jobs than any other state in the nation.<sup>12</sup> Here is another example of what New Jersey has done, and the overall statistics justify the program's works while establishing New Jersey as a leader in homelessness.

“New Jersey’s Neighborhood Preservation Balanced Housing program creates housing opportunities in viable neighborhoods for households of low and moderate income and is funded by the New Jersey Realty Transfer Tax. It uses the following practices and techniques:

- Housing trust funds;
- Rent subsidies to households, to reduce what the household must pay to what it can afford at 30% of its income;
- Production subsidies of various types, including land acquisition and costs of construction; and
- Establishment of a statewide allocation of affordable housing to assure that each municipality includes its “fair share” of housing affordable to very low-income households.

<sup>10</sup> Martha Burt, “ENDING HOMELESSNESS: WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS IT WILL TAKE,” Purdue.edu, Purdue University, Urban Institute Principal, [https://www.purdue.edu/hhs/hdfs/fii/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/s\\_wifis35chapter\\_mb.pdf](https://www.purdue.edu/hhs/hdfs/fii/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/s_wifis35chapter_mb.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Martha Burt, “ENDING HOMELESSNESS: WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS IT WILL TAKE,” Purdue.edu, Purdue University, Urban Institute Principal, [https://www.purdue.edu/hhs/hdfs/fii/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/s\\_wifis35chapter\\_mb.pdf](https://www.purdue.edu/hhs/hdfs/fii/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/s_wifis35chapter_mb.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Fair Share Housing Center. (n.d.). *What is the Mount Laurel Doctrine?* webpage. Retrieved from <http://fairsharehousing.org/mount-laurel-doctrine/>.

The net result of all these policies is the access of more than 60,000 households to affordable housing, distributed fairly within communities around the state—and still counting.”<sup>13</sup>

In conclusion, we have learned that although the bible provides instructions on how to live fruitful, harmonious lives together, humanity still exercises practices of greed, fear, and selfishness that separate different groups of people. Our theological paper focused on segregation and its effect on African Americans. We learned that segregation creates a fracture in society by separating groups of people, which in turn creates another fracture within the African American community: homelessness.

Our short study determined that one rupture leads to another, contributing to our fractured society. Jesus tells us plainly, “Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.” Our paper provides opportunities for the writer's perspective on how this fragmentation can be fixed, but only time will tell if this ongoing problem will continue. As we depart, we must remember that as the church, we have a small part to play in helping those less fortunate than us. Who knows? Maybe one day, we will be in their shoes and need God's loving, caring hand to pick us up and be a blessing in the future.

**13** Fair Share Housing Center. (n.d.). *What is the Mount Laurel Doctrine?* webpage. Retrieved from <http://fairsharehousing.org/mount-laurel-doctrine/>.