



Psalm 119.105

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The Cityward Mind of God

Roderick A. Graciano — July 2004

Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted,
but by the mouth of the wicked it is destroyed.

Prov. 11.11

What This Article Is Not

A Call to Inner-City Ministry

The Great Commission will draw many of God's people to dedicated work in the older, poorer and more densely populated sections of major cities, but this is *not* what this article is about.

A Call to Political Activism

We need godly people in government now more than ever, but this is *not* what this article is about.

A Criticism of Suburban Living

God will call some who live in the country to move to the city, but apart from clear guidance to pull up roots, Paul's counsel applies: "Let every man remain in the calling in which he was called" (1Cor 7.20). Moving to the city is *not* what this article is about.

Dear friends of Timothy Ministries,

We have often spoken of God's concern for nations, families and individuals. I believe, however, that we have overlooked His pointed interest in cities. It is God's concern for cities *as corporate relational units* to which I draw your attention in this article.

Sodom & Gomorrah

Abraham was perhaps the first person to take note of God's corporate view of cities. As recorded in Genesis 18, God told Abraham about His intent to bring Sodom and Gomorrah to account. Abraham, knowing the corruption of Sodom and that his righteous nephew Lot lived there (2Pet 2.7), was dismayed to realize that God was about *judge the cities corporately* instead of meting out justice to individuals, person by person. Can you imagine the public outcry that would occur if *our* government penalized an entire city for the crimes of some of its inhabitants? Abraham recognized God's right to judge cities, but Abraham's alarm over the impending consequences to a righteous minority compelled him to make a bold plea:

Far be it from you to do such a thing — to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?" (Gen. 18.25)

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Graciously, the Lord agreed to spare the city of Sodom if even *ten* righteous people could be found in it. By this concession, we see that God *does* concern himself with individuals. Nevertheless, He has a corporate perspective, viewing cities in the light of the individuals who inhabit them, and viewing individuals in the light of their actual or potential influence on their city.

Jonah and Nineveh

God does not only concern Himself with cities when He has purposed to judge them. He also turns His attention to cities to redeem them. This is the overlooked message of Jonah's story. Does it not amaze us that God would supernaturally override a prophet's will in order to deliver that prophet to the doorstep of an undeserving city? Yet, God did just that, bringing stubborn Jonah from the depths of the sea to deliver a redemptive message of repentance to Nineveh. Jonah, fearing the future military consequences for Israel, became disgruntled when God spared Nineveh. Then Jonah became quite irritated when a shady gourd plant withered, but God reproved the prophet saying,

"You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. *Should I not be concerned about that great city?*" (Jonah 4.10,11)

Christ's Attention to Cities

Consistent with God's ways in the Old Testament epochs, Christ demonstrated his consciousness of cities as corporate units when he warned the towns of Galilee. We know that the towns Jesus reproved had some righteous families in them. Peter's family lived in Capernaum, for example. Nevertheless, Jesus assessed the corporate character of towns and cities and rebuked them accordingly:

Matt. 11.20 Then Jesus began to denounce *the cities* in which most of his miracles had been performed, *because they did not repent*. 21 "Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. 23 And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to the skies? No, you will go down to the depths. If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. 24 But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you."

To our amazement, Jesus expected these cities to repent *as cities!* Nineveh did so (Jonah 3.4-10), and Jesus expected the same from the Galilean cities when a "greater than Jonah" visited them.

As Jesus warned of judgment upon cities, He also yearned for their redemption, most of all for the city of Jerusalem:

Matt. 23.37 "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing.



Cities of the Future

God's *eschatological* declarations about cities provide us with further evidence of His *cityward* mind. Speaking of the future Day of the LORD, God said through Isaiah that:

In that day five cities in Egypt will speak the language of Canaan and swear allegiance to the LORD Almighty. One of them will be called the City of Destruction. (Is. 19.18)

Notice that the prophecy does not simply say, “*many* in Egypt will speak, etc.” Rather, five cities are explicitly indicated, including one that God will rename because of the strategic victory involved in its conversion.¹

Isaiah goes on to praise God for His victory over the nations, and declares His judgment and redemption *in terms of cities*:

Is. 25.1 O LORD, you are my God; I will exalt you and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done marvelous things, things planned long ago. 2 *You have made the city a heap of rubble, the fortified town a ruin, the foreigners' stronghold a city no more; it will never be rebuilt.* 3 Therefore strong peoples will honor you; *cities of ruthless nations will revere you.*

Consistent with this prophesied redemption of cities, Jesus taught that His servants would rule over *cities*. In one of his parables, Jesus related the decree of the returning king to a faithful servant:

Luke 19.17 “‘Well done, my good servant!’ his master replied. ‘Because you have been trustworthy in a very small matter, take charge of *ten cities*.’”

The promise of Jesus to His overcomers in Revelation 2.26,27 crowns the biblical revelation of the cityward inclination of God's mind. Christ promises to give His servants authority over the nations! No wonder Paul taught that “godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* the life to come.”² Jesus is preparing his servants to exercise authority over the nations,³ and His parables revealed that this authority will be exercised in *the stewardship of cities*.

The City God Loves

Why does God love cities, and concern himself for their spiritual health? Because they are relational federations, and it is in such covenant communities that the redemptive work of Jesus is best manifested. God has always called His people into community, and He has done so for a purpose. The Father purposes to provide suitable siblings for His Son (Rom. 8.29), and to provide such siblings requires that redeemed people become like Christ in their character. The character of Christ, indeed of the Trinity, is relational from eternity. We can only become like Christ as we perfect the skills of holy, loving relationship, i.e., what the Bible calls “fellowship” (Greek: *koinonia*). These practical fellowship-skills, will only be honed in community. Therefore, the Lord has decreed that we will serve Him and relate to Him in community.⁴ In fact, when the Spirit pictures the redeemed as Christ's bride, He reveals the bride *as a city* (Rev. 21.9, 10)!

The Spiritual Battle Front

But there's more! God also concerns himself for cities because as relational federations they represent the primary battlegrounds for the war between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan. History confirms what the Bible tells us both in metaphor and example: cities wield spiritual influence over their populace, and the Holy Spirit and the spirit of Evil both seek the reins of that influence.⁵

In fact, from the creation of the world there was never a religiously *unaffiliated* city (or nation) until the time of the French Revolution.

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In antiquity one could hardly separate the social from religious facets of society. It was unacceptable for members of the Greek cities that the Jews wanted to live as members of the civil society of a city, but did not want to fulfill religious duties, such as the veneration of the gods of the city (cf. Jos. *Antiq.* II:125f ; *Ap.* II:65, 79). The refusal to honour the gods of the people amongst whom they lived caused the Gentiles to consider the Jews to be “**irreligious**” (Jos. *Ap.* II:148, 291).⁶

It is only since around 1795, that society has promulgated the idea of a secular city, i.e., a city without its own tutelary deity. Since that time, cities have been founded, or rededicated, as secular federations devoted to secular purposes, without allegiance or even reference to any particular deity. However, ***the spiritual realm abhors a vacuum*** (consider Mat. 12.43-45). Do we imagine that no “god” rules over our present-day cities? I propose that there is a ruling “spiritual influence” over each city, and when that influence is evil it will fight to maintain its authority over the populace.⁷ The Kingdom of God can only advance in our city as it takes territory from the Kingdom of Evil.

Stewarding Our Cities Now

I fear that as Christians we have forgotten some of the city-oriented priorities of God’s Kingdom. We recite the Lord’s prayer, “Thy kingdom come,” but we’ve not put feet to that prayer when it comes to our city. Doesn’t it seem reasonable that if God is preparing us to steward the redeemed cities of the future, that we should start making a greater spiritual investment in our cities now?

Invest In The City Where You Live

It is no accident that we each live in the city that we do. As Paul told the Athenians in Acts 17,

26 From one man [God] made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and ***he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.*** 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

God sovereignly determines where people live, and He does so to give everyone the best possible opportunity for redemption. Think about that! God planted your neighbors in your city because it is the best place for them to seek and possibly find God. Clearly, God intends that our neighbors come to the knowledge of the truth (1Tim 2.4), but there may be another “god” in our city that is doing all he can to keep that from happening.

Our calling then, is to energetically invest ourselves in living out our mandate of love (John 13.34, 35) and our Great Commission (Mat. 28.19,20), *in our city first*, and then beyond (Acts 1.8). Furthermore, we must invest in our city *for our city*, not just for the sake of our local congregation!

This is particularly true for our Christian leaders. Have you ever noticed the form in which history remembers the names of early Christian leaders? You may not know Augustine’s family name, but you know that he was “Augustine *of Hippo*.” Hippo, was Hippo Regius, the ancient name of the modern, north African city of Annaba (or Bône), Algeria, and the place where Augustine poured out his life as shepherd and theologian. Similarly, you may have heard of Clement of Rome, Clement of Alexandria, Polycarp of Smyrna, Ignatius of Antioch, and so forth. These saints’ names became inextricably linked to the cities, not necessarily where they were born, but where they invested their lives. Wouldn’t it be amazing if the names of Christian leaders once again became linked to the names of the cities where they minister? What if the names of Christian leaders became linked to the names of their cities more than to the names of their local churches or denominations. Such a thing could only happen if a leader served his city in a profound way, and that could only happen if there were a paradigm shift in ministry philosophy for both pastors and their congregations.

The City's Fishnet

The first shift in our thinking must be away from an exclusive focus on the success of our own local congregation and toward the success of the multi-congregation church of our city. Historically, local churches have competed for attendees, and then attempted to keep “their sheep” from straying into other congregations. *Personal commitment to a home congregation is essential* and I loathe church-hopping. However, we are in no danger of running out of enough unbelievers to go around, and in general, *what is good for the church of the city will be good for our own congregation.*⁸ The principle of reciprocity works in the spiritual realm (Prov. 11.25), and working for the success of the church down the street will contribute to the success of our own. With the Holy Spirit's help, both pastors *and* their congregations must grasp this vision.

We must grasp this vision because the voice of a fragmented city-church will never sound convincing to unbelievers. Jesus said that it is *our love for one another* that will mark us as His authentic disciples. Pastor's wife, Sherry Varkonyi, recently shared a compelling insight with a number of our county's pastors. She compared the *network* of our churches to God's *fishnet* in our county. Christ has called us to be fishers of men (Mat 4.19), but if there are holes in our net, i.e., broken or missing relationships in our network of churches, it's no wonder that so many fish get away.

The Source of Supply

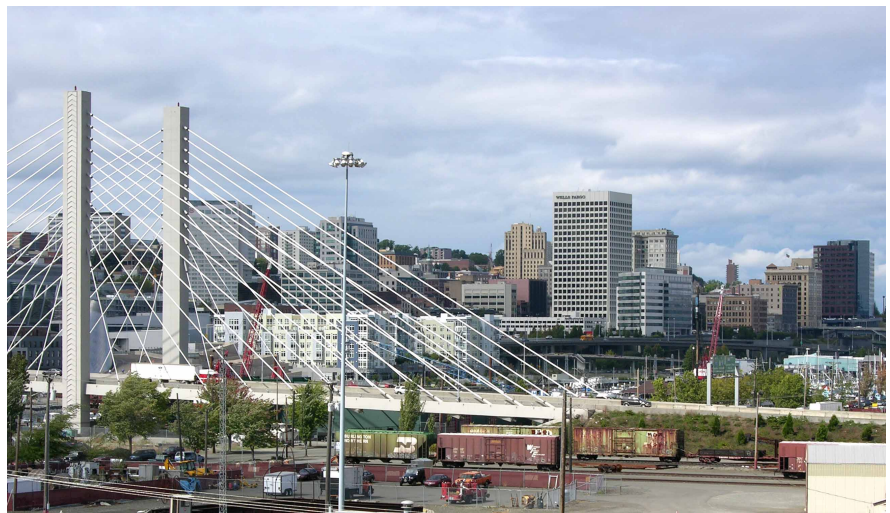
Until it is unified, the church of my city will never bring in a great catch of God's fish. Nor will it achieve spiritual maturity while its parts remain severed from one another. Paul teaches in Eph. 4.16, that the growth of the Body of Christ comes through the joints! It's at the point where the different parts of the body connect with one another that the nourishment for growth flows. The different parts of the city-church must connect, and they will connect first through their pastors.

Pastors Pursuing Peers

This brings up a second shift in our thinking that must occur: Congregations must release, even *mandate*, their pastors to befriend their peers in the city. The pastor's weekly schedule should include time to pray with and socialize with other pastors. Congregations must not see this as “the pastor using salaried time for non-church business”! They must take the risk of encouraging their pastor to link up with other pastors, and then they will reap the benefits in their own congregation in due time. As authentic friendships grow between pastors, corporate prayer will increase for the city and *all* congregations in the city will benefit. Growing cooperation between pastors and their flocks will result in more effective outreach, and ultimately in the winning of the spiritual battle for the city.

My City

Over the last 30 years I have had a steadily growing conviction about the priority of the city-church. I'm convinced that Christ-honoring, Bible-believing churches must build relationship with one another without delay, and together become the spiritual stewards of their cities. To that end, Timothy Ministries actively promotes friendships and prayer fellowships



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among pastors in our city of Tacoma and its surrounding area.⁹

I close by asking you to prayerfully consider how God may be calling you to make a spiritual investment in your city, and by *thanking you* for all the encouragement and help you have given us as we have invested in ours. May God continue to richly bless you!

Roderick A. Graciano



Director

END NOTES

¹ [This passage is about the future conversion of Egyptian people.] Erlandsson (p. 78), following Kissane, understands it in this way and sees in the five cities an allusion to the original conquest of Canaan by the Israelites. After the capture of Jericho and Ai by Joshua's forces, their first great victory was over the kings of five important Canaanite cities, namely Jerusalem, Hebron, Jarmuth, Lachish, and Eglon (Josh 10). This victory led to the conquest of the whole country. So, Kissane and Erlandsson maintain, the spiritual conquest of Egypt outlined in vv.19-22 starts with the conversion of five cities promised in v.18. This interpretation not only fits the context perfectly but would also furnish a further example of allusion to the Exodus-Conquest period that is such a feature of this oracle.

What then is "the City of Destruction"? The Hebrew *ir haheres* seems like a play on ... the Hebrew equivalent of Heliopolis, the City of the Sun. The latter is actually read in some of the ancient sources of the text (see Notes). If so, then, the conversion of the people of this stronghold of sun worship is perhaps treated as a major victory, decisive enough and significant enough as a great act of destruction at the time of the Conquest. (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gaebelin, Ed., Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, 1990, Electronic text hypertexted and prepared by OakTree Software, Inc.)

² 1Tim. 4.8.

³ Cf. 2Tim. 2.12; Rev. 5.10; 20.4.

⁴ Prov. 18.1; Heb. 10.25. Also of interest here is the early Christian *Epistle of Barnabas*, 4.10,11: Let us flee from every kind of vanity; let us hate completely the works of the evil way. **Do not withdraw within yourselves and live alone, as though you were already justified, but gather together and seek out together the common good.** 11 For the Scripture says: "Woe to those who are wise in their own opinion, and clever in their own eyes." Let us become spiritual; let us become a perfect temple for God. To the best of our ability, let us cultivate the fear of God and strive to keep his commandments, that we may rejoice in his ordinances.

⁵ Consider Rev. 2.13.

⁶ du Toit, A. (1998). *The New Testament Milieu* (hbnt.3.1191). Halfway House: Orion.

⁶ I find it interesting that the City-County Building of Salt Lake City is purported to be haunted. Source: Brad Steiger, *Real Ghosts, Restless Spirits, and Haunted Places* (Visible Ink, 2003).

⁸ The larger principle is: *What is good for the city, is good for its inhabitants, whether individuals or churches* (Jer. 29.7; Ps. 122.6-9).

⁹ You can see what pastors in our area are thinking about at <http://piercepastors.blogspot.com/>.