

DOUG BANISTER

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seek
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peace
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city

TEN WAYS TO BLESS THE
PLACE WHERE YOU LIVE



Seek the Peace of the City

Ten Ways to Bless the Place Where You Live

By Doug Banister

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Knoxville, Tennessee

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INTRODUCTION

We're All in This Together

His thin arms clutching his sides, Martin shivered by the side of the pool. I was puzzled. A rare June heat wave had warmed the water so that it felt like soup. Even though we practiced in the evenings, the temperature was still in the nineties. Why was he so cold?

Martin was new to our team. A young mother in our church named Emily had noticed Martin roaming her neighborhood, unsupervised, from early in the morning until late at night. She asked Martin if he would like to be on the swim team. Martin said yes, and Emily went to work, organizing rides and meals.

“How old are you, Martin?” I asked him the first day Emily brought him by.

“Ten,” he said.

“Do you know how to swim?”

“Sure do!”

Martin dove in and sank like a rock.

Two weeks later, however, Martin was able to swim across the pool. I had never seen anyone learn how to swim so fast. Martin had rare athletic ability and an exceptional feel for the water. His only problem was shivering! He could not make it through a workout without shivering so violently that he had to get out of the pool and wrap up in a towel.

Despite this strange setback, Martin improved so quickly that we entered him in the first meet. We sat next to each other on the bus. “Coach Doug?” Martin asked. “Can I have my dinner now? I haven’t eaten in two days.” A parent of four, I knew a con when I saw one. “No buddy,” I teased. “You need to wait until everyone else eats later on tonight.”

The hot summer wore on, and Martin kept shivering. One evening, a social worker who knew Martin showed up at the pool. I asked her if she knew why Martin always shivered. She pulled me aside and whispered, “It’s because he’s literally starving. The woman he lives with told a judge that she was ‘starving the devil out of him.’ He’s malnourished.” I felt sick. Martin had not been conning me on the bus. He really hadn’t eaten in two days. He lived two miles away from my office on Market Square, and he was literally starving.

The Downside of Suburban Life

I grew up in the suburbs. I went to college and seminary in the suburbs. I spent fifteen years serving a church in the suburbs. Even though I now serve an urban church, I still live in the suburbs. Suburban life has been good to my family and me. We've enjoyed good schools, green lawns, and not worrying too much about locking the front door.

But there is a downside to suburban life. I became aware of it shortly after the fall of communism when the church I was pastoring began a mission partnership with a church in a Romanian city. I travelled to this city several times a year and got to know the city rather well, working closely with a saint of a pastor who had faithfully endured persecution at the hands of the Communists. Under his guidance, teams from our church ministered to the orphans, lepers, and homeless of his troubled city. It was a very rewarding partnership. One morning between mission trips, I was reading through the Book of Jeremiah in my devotions and came across some verses that I had never before read:



This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says to all those I carried into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: "Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters; find wives for your sons and give your daughters in marriage, so that they too may

have sons and daughters. Increase in number there; do not decrease. Also, seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper. (JER. 29:4-7 NIV)

Intrigued, I pulled out some commentaries to figure out what was going on. Jeremiah wrote this letter shortly after Babylonian armies sacked Jerusalem circa 588 B.C. About 10,000 citizens of Jerusalem were dragged across the desert and scattered across the great city of Babylon. They hated life in Babylon. They begged God to judge the despised city and send them home. Not surprisingly, false prophets emerged predicting just that. God then inspired Jeremiah, who had remained behind in razed Jerusalem, to write a pastoral letter to the exiles living in Babylon.

Jeremiah's message stands in stark contrast to the message of the false prophets. "Don't sit on your suitcases and count down the days until you can flee the city," he tells them. He urged them to instead unpack, put down roots, raise families, and get to know their neighbors. They were even to seek the peace and prosperity of the city that they despised!

Fear of the City

God's word has a way of haunting you, and Jeremiah 29:7 began to drift into my mind more and more often. I identified with the Israelites' fear of the city. The city seemed like such a dark place to me, filled with gangs and drugs, prostitutes and murder.

*Why must the heroes and heroines of these books
flee the city?*

I went to college at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. Evanston is a pleasant, tree-lined suburb on the banks of Lake Michigan, just a few train stops north of Chicago. During my junior year eleven people were murdered and thirty-seven wounded at Chicago's Cabrini Greene housing complex. Mayor Byrne moved in for a while to clean things up, but that didn't last long. One night when the Cabrini murders were in the headlines, I fell asleep on a southbound train. I awoke terrified that I had ridden the train into the bowels of the city, and fear gripped me like giant pinchers.

I don't think I'm the only Christian who has been wary of the city and felt the grip of panic and fear. Andy Crouch, a writer for *Christianity Today*, read thirty-four Christian novels and then wrote an essay describing the worldview he found in them. He identified a common character, "an urbanized or suburbanized professional who must shed the trappings of her successful life and return to the small town of her roots." Why must the heroes and heroines of these books flee the city? Crouch came to the conclusion

that in these books “the Big City contains little but religious compromise, political machinations, empty wealth and death for one of true faith.”¹

Thomas Merton, the Columbia-educated monk, exhibits a similar disdain for cities in his early writings. In his best-selling guide to the spiritual life, *Seeds of Contemplation*, he warns his readers, “Do everything you can to avoid the noise and business of men. Keep as far as you can from the places where they gather to cheat and insult one another, to exploit one another, or to mock one another with their false gestures of friendship.”²

Shalom

God urges his children to not avoid their city but to seek its peace and prosperity. The Hebrew word translated as “peace and prosperity” is *shalom*. *Shalom* is a big word in the Bible, so big in fact that translators must use a wide range of words to capture its essence. Shalom, at its heart, is peace but not peace in the sense of the absence of conflict. The idea is much broader than that. When the

*It dawned on me that God had put me in my own city
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*God, what does it mean for me
to seek the peace of my city?*

Hebrew writers use the word *shalom*, they evoke a vision of restoration and wholeness towards which scripture in its entirety moves. Whole books have been written on this one word. One of them begins: “The central vision of world history in the Bible is that all of creation is one, every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and well being of every other creature. The biblical word that describes that controlling vision is *shalom*.”³ It dawned on me that God had put me in my own city to seek its peace.

Over the months that followed, I read Jeremiah’s letter to the exiles many times. I began to see that I had arranged my life to avoid the neighborhoods in my city that scared me. Our city’s highway system made it possible for me to easily navigate around the places where all the bad stuff happened. Why did I know more about a city in Romania than I knew about neighborhoods five miles from my house?

I also began to wonder if my gospel was too small. I believed, and still believe, that the Church's mission is to preach the gospel, the good news that Jesus Christ has saved us from our sins through the cross. Yet, when the prophets dreamed of God's shalom coming to earth, they envisioned the transformation of whole communities. Could this be part of the gospel hope as well? I began praying a dangerous prayer: "God, what does it mean for me to seek the peace of my city?"

The Danger of Taking a Walk

God began to answer that prayer in 1996 when my friend Jon, his wife Toni, and their two boys sold their home near ours and moved into one of Knoxville's poorest inner city neighborhoods. Jon and Toni had also been wrestling with Jeremiah 29:7. It seemed like a lot of us were in those days. They decided that the best way for their family to seek the peace of the city was to move into an at-risk neighborhood and try to be good neighbors. Jon and I began walking and praying in his neighborhood on Wednesday mornings before work. Jon lived near a housing project that was often in the headlines for the wrong reasons. I remember being afraid the morning I drove downtown for our first walk.

We followed this ritual most Wednesday mornings for the next several years. I saw things on our walks I'd never seen before in my neighborhood: syringes on playgrounds, prostitutes turning their last trick, hustlers selling drugs. After a while, I began tutoring at the neighborhood's elementary school. My children were attending a

How can such poverty exist only five miles away from my house? How is it possible that I have lived in this city for a decade and not known about it?

school in the same system about five miles away, and I had always assumed that all the schools in the system had the same resources and results. I was mistaken. The school in my neighborhood was new and clean. The school in Jon's neighborhood was outdated and shabby. My children had new textbooks. The kids in Jon's school used ones that were falling apart. My kids' school had a new roof. The roof on the school in Jon's neighborhood leaked, and the janitor had to line the hall with buckets to catch the rainwater. Only later did I learn how these "cosmetic" differences translated into test scores. You can probably guess which school had the students who performed better.

Driving home from tutoring one day I remember thinking, "How can such poverty exist only five miles away from my house? How is it possible that I have lived in this city for a decade and not known about it?"

Johnnie

Shortly thereafter, God brought a mentor into my life named Johnnie Skinner. Johnnie was, and still is, a fiery,

brilliant pastor of an African American church on the east side. Johnnie gave me books that explained ministry in the city from a black perspective. More importantly, he became my friend. After a while, we began to trust each other, and Johnnie started to feel comfortable, asking me some painful questions that made me look at the city in a new way. For example, one day I mentioned how thankful I was for a wonderful youth ministry that reaches thousands of high school kids with the gospel. Johnnie asked me why suburban evangelical churches spend millions of dollars caring for their own teenagers and almost no money caring for urban youth.

Another day, Johnnie and I met for lunch. “Why do suburban churches spend all their money on themselves?” Johnnie asked as my cheeseburger became cold. “All these kingdom dollars going to build up the white church! You spend it on your own buildings, your own seminaries, and your own conferences while we work with next to nothing!” Part of me wanted to dismiss Johnnie as an angry black man. I certainly disagreed with him on more than one occasion. But Johnnie was my friend. He loved me, and I loved him. The more I saw the world from his perspective, the more I understood why he was angry.

The Common Good

My wrestling matches with the prophet Jeremiah, my morning walks with Jon, and my troubling conversations with Johnnie led me to rethink my relationship with my city. I grew increasingly troubled with a theology of mission that led our church to spend thousands of dollars

A commitment to the common good is grounded in the belief that all human beings bear God's image and thus are interconnected, bound together as partners in the dance of life.

on mission trips to serve other cities while ignoring the needs in our own backyard. I began to develop a commitment to what Catholic theologians refer to as the common good. A commitment to the common good is grounded in the belief that all human beings bear God's image and thus are interconnected, bound together as partners in the dance of life. In a *Christianity Today* essay, Andy Crouch summarizes the common good as a commitment to pursuing “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”⁴ A commitment to the common good includes a belief that we are all in this together, especially when we share the same city. As Martin Luther King puts it, “In a real sense all life is interrelated. The agony of the poor enriches the rich. We are inevitably our brother's keeper because we are our brother's brother. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly.”⁵

Eventually, Thomas Merton came to the same realization. On March 18, 1958, he had an epiphany that

changed the course of his life and ministry. He wrote about it in his journal:



In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness....⁶

Vision in a Graveyard

My own epiphany came on Thursday, March 24, 2001. I had arrived early on the campus of Maryville College, hoping to spend a few moments in prayer before listening to a lecture. Milling about, students enjoyed a warm spring evening. Looking around for a quiet place, I spotted an old graveyard nestled beneath a towering oak tree behind the campus. I sat on a stone bench that overlooked a dozen worn gravestones and faced the blue-gray mists of the mountains. Several of the tombstones memorialized Presbyterian ministers. I fixed on one of them, and my thoughts drifted as they usually do between the ridiculous and the sublime.

Then I had a vision. I saw a tombstone with my name on it. A scripture verse was carved into the granite beneath my name. It was Jeremiah 29:7. Nine months later, I resigned from my pastorate and moved my office into the

city. A year later, with the help of some friends, I began All Souls Church.

A Call for All of Us

Tim Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan and the author of several excellent books on urban ministry, spoke on Jeremiah's letter to the exiles at the 2010 Lausanne Conference in South Africa. Keller notes that Jeremiah's call to seek the peace of the city marks a significant shift in God's approach towards cities. Earlier in the Old Testament, God's redemptive plan focused on the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was to be "the joy of the whole earth" (Ps. 48:2). The people of Israel were to live in Jerusalem in a manner that displayed God's glory to the world. God's strategy changed, however, after Israel is taken into exile.

The Jews found themselves in the strange, dangerous city of Babylon. (VERSE 4 ACTUALLY SAYS THAT GOD SENDS THEM THERE.) They wanted to go home. Yet God tells his people to stay put. "What is the relationship of believers to such a place?" Keller asks. "Jeremiah 28-29 holds out a remarkable outline for a believer's stance towards the city. God tells his people to [...] settle down and engage the life of the great city[...]Most striking of all, God calls them to serve the city[...]They are not simply to increase their tribe in a ghetto within the city but are to use their resources to benefit the common good." Later in the sermon Keller asks, "Is there any reason to believe that the model for Israel in Babylon should serve as the model for the church?" Here is his answer:



Yes. In exile, Israel no longer existed in the form of a nation-state with its own government and laws. Instead it existed as an international community and counterculture within other nations. This is also now the form of the church, as Peter and James acknowledge when addressing believers as “the dispersion” (JAMES 1:1) and “exiles” (1 PETER 1:1).

In other words, Jeremiah 29:4-7 is a model for Christians today. Like the Israelites, Christians are resident aliens in the cities where they live. God sends us into our city to bless the people there the same way that he sent the Jews.⁷

I believe every Christian in our community is called by God to seek the peace of our city. I believe this calling applies to you no matter where you live in our community. It’s not enough to care only about our little corner of the city. We need to care about every neighbor in our city, specifically those who experience shalom the least. We don’t all need to move to an at-risk neighborhood, volunteer at an inner city non-profit, or attend an inner city church, but we do need to care about those who suffer a few miles from our doorstep. We don’t need to stop taking mission trips to cities thousands of miles away, but we do need to pay attention to the weak and vulnerable right here at home.

How do I seek the peace of my city these days? This book is my answer to that question. We’ll explore ten practices that anyone can use to seek the peace of the city. You

won't need to do all ten, but you will find that your own gifts, calling, and desires connect with some of them. We'll end with an epilogue that looks at the fundamental relationship between the gospel and seeking the peace of the city.

We must remember what's at stake. Consider what these lines from Dante's sonnet, "La Vita Nuova" ("THE NEW LIFE"), say about Christians who ignore their city's needs:



*Oh, pilgrims walking by oblivious
your minds, it seems, on something not at hand,
can you have come from such a distant land—
the way you look suggests as much to us—
that you're not weeping, even as you pass
right through the suffering city, like that band
of people who, it seems, don't understand
a thing about the measure of its loss.²⁸*

May the same never be said of us.



wounds and have a clearer notion of what seeking her peace means. Shalom-making in the city begins with listening.

During the summer of 2012, I did a lot of “city listening.” I read a number of books on Knoxville’s history,⁹ and a team from our church met with historians, journalists, politicians, preachers, businessmen, and activists and asked them to tell us Knoxville’s story. When the people we interviewed finished talking, we asked them to name our city’s wounds. The same three wounds were mentioned nearly every time.

Relational Cut-Offs

The first wound that came up repeatedly in our research is what I will call “relational cut-offs.” When I meet with a couple for premarital counseling, we begin

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by making a genogram of their family system, which maps out the relationships in their families. One of the relational patterns I watch out for is these relational cut-offs. For example, a son might be estranged from his father. Even if this cut-off occurred a long time in the past, it shapes the way the son lives in the present. If we think of Knoxville as a family system, we find a significant number of relational cut-offs, going back to our city's earliest days. Could they still be shaping life within our city today? Consider the following examples.

James White was a Revolutionary War veteran and real estate developer. He knew a deal when he saw one. General White brought his family over the mountains from North Carolina and purchased a thousand acres along the Tennessee River. Many others followed him, and it soon became apparent that White's quiet forest was going to become a town. His son-in-law, Charles McClung, laid out a grid of streets and sixty-four half-acre lots, imitating the layout of Philadelphia. On October 3, 1791, the general

held a lottery and distributed the lots, and the city of Knoxville was officially born.

During that same year William Blount, a wealthy land speculator and the new governor of the Southwest Territory, met with forty-one Cherokee chiefs and negotiated the Treaty of Holston. The treaty gave the Cherokees the right to keep their existing settlements in and around James White's Fort. Because the Cherokee had backed the British in the war, many whites believed that the Cherokee had forfeited their right to the land beyond the Appalachians. Thousands of settlers poured through the mountains looking for land. For obvious reasons, Knoxville's first citizens did not have good relationships with their Cherokee neighbors, and slowly but surely, they drove the Cherokee from the lands that they had always inhabited.

Fast forward to the 1860s. During the Civil War, Knoxville was one of the nation's most divided cities. Rallies for Confederate and Union troops were held on opposite ends of Gay Street at the same time! Ten percent of the town's 4,400 citizens were slaves, and many of the city's business leaders were sympathetic to the South.¹⁰ On the Union side, men like Parson Brownlow, the editor of the *Knoxville Whig*, threatened to take up arms against anyone who sided with the Confederates.

After Tennessee seceded from the Union, tensions in the city reached their boiling point. Thomas Humes described living in Knoxville at that time as living under a

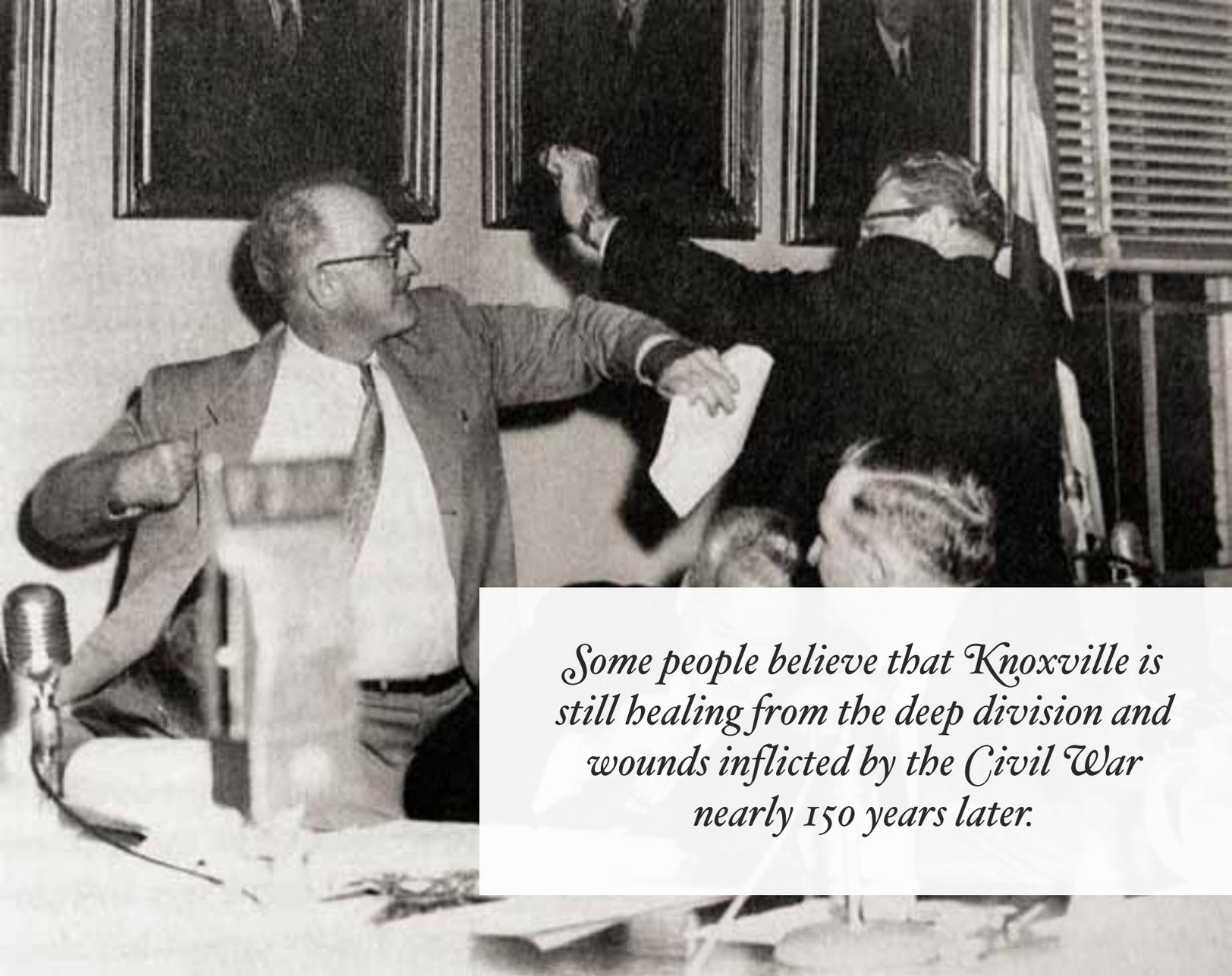
reign of terror.¹¹ Even families and churches were divided. Violence broke out. In May of 1861, Union sympathizers gathered for a rally on Gay and Main. Charlie Douglas was watching the rally from his window on Gay Street and was shot while jeering the Confederacy.¹²

The violence reached a terrifying crescendo on the cold night of November 28th at the Battle of Fort Sanders. Burnside's troops slaughtered Longstreet's men as they climbed an icy hill and fell into hidden pits. Though this bloody skirmish lasted only twenty minutes, the Confederate troops sustained a casualty every one and a half seconds. Longstreet's men were forced to retreat the next day. The following Sunday, Union supporters in Knoxville's downtown churches walked together down Kingston Road to view the battleground. Confederate worshippers stayed home.¹³

Some people believe that Knoxville is still healing from the deep division and wounds inflicted by the Civil War nearly 150 years later.

Cas Walker epitomizes another relational cut-off in our city. The owner of a chain of grocery stores, Walker served as a city councilman from 1941 until 1972 and eventually became mayor. For half a century, he proved to be one of Knoxville's most controversial figures.

During the Depression, and for at least a generation before it, poor Appalachian farmers moved to Knoxville



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because they could no longer support their families with farm work. They were typically poor and had less education than the middle class population whose members had moved from all over the country to work for University of Tennessee, Oak Ridge, and TVA. Knoxvillians with Appalachian roots found a champion in Cas Walker.

Walker's constituency valued stability, but the newcomers valued growth and change. Cas dubbed them "the silk stocking crowd," and resisted nearly any effort they pro-

posed to move the city forward. The newcomers feared the rest of the South was passing them by while Walker, in effect, held the town hostage. Historian Bruce Wheeler believes that Knoxville is still divided today along the same lines and points to the County Commission as an example. Commissioners from neighborhoods with Appalachian roots are constantly at odds with commissioners from neighborhoods made up of newcomers.

Knoxville is home to another form of division as well: racism. Though most white Knoxvillians think that few race problems exist in our city, many black Knoxvillians feel cut off and disempowered. African American poet Nikki Giovanni, who was born in Knoxville, recalls what it was like for her to grow up in our city:



I was born there[...]during the age of segregation. When you couldn't go to the same amusement park. Or the same movie theater. When the white guys would cruise up and down the streets and call to you. When the black guys were afraid of being lynched[...]When Dow Drugstore wouldn't serve us. When neighborhoods were redlined.¹⁴

When All Souls Church first started meeting to worship, we looked at many spaces downtown, including the Bijou Theatre. As I made my way up to the second balcony that afternoon, I was shocked to see an old sign stored there that said no blacks were allowed in the seats below. Bob Booker, the writer and civil rights activist, told us



that he still remembers the shame of having to walk up the fire escape to go see a movie in the Bijou because he was not allowed through the front door.

Another reason why some black Knoxvilleians feel cut off from the rest of the city is urban renewal. Urban renewal was part of the War on Poverty, a federal program designed to remove urban blight and clean up cities. The first urban renewal projects in Knoxville began in 1959 and ended in 1973. One of the most controversial projects took place in the Mountain View neighborhood where

the Hyatt Hotel and Civic Coliseum now stand. The project leveled this mostly black neighborhood and forced about 2,000 residents to move elsewhere in the city.

The all-white county commission at the time felt they were cleaning up a very poor community and giving its residents a chance to start over. The black leaders I've talked to, however, feel that urban renewal destroyed the black community in Knoxville. Businesses owned by blacks for generations—movie theaters, restaurants, medical practices, and bakeries—were closed and forced

A black and white photograph showing a street completely covered in rubble and debris, likely the result of urban renewal. In the background, a modern building with a curved roof and columns is visible. The scene is desolate and illustrates the impact of the project described in the text.

One of the black leaders I interviewed referred to urban renewal as “Negro removal.”

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to relocate. With their customer bases scattered, few of these businesses survived. One of the black leaders I interviewed referred to urban renewal as “Negro removal.”

In her poem “Gemini,” Nikki Giovanni remembers that her grandmother’s home was destroyed to make space for an off-ramp. The 1954 Interstate Act literally paved the way for decades of massive highway projects that enabled an automobile-crazed society to get around more quickly. These projects, in turn, made it easier for people to live in the suburbs and avoid the taxes and growing crime rates in the city. City planners viewed the inner city as dying, and thus didn’t give much consideration to how the new freeways might affect inner city neighborhoods. These highways sliced historic neighborhoods into pieces and separated neighbors who had lived close to one another for generations.

As with any family system, Knoxville’s relational cut-offs continue to shape the way that we relate to one another. Divisions make collaboration a struggle. Historian Bruce

Wheeler went so far as to say, “I don’t even think Knoxville is a city. I think it is a cluster of neighborhoods who don’t communicate very well with one another.”¹⁵ Our unresolved conflicts still haunt us. We tend to distrust people from other parts of town, and we have difficulty working together for the common good.

We need to keep this in mind as we discern God’s invitation to seek the peace of our city. Shalom-making in Knoxville will likely have something to do with honestly addressing these cut-offs and building unity and trust.

Identity Confusion

The second wound that kept turning up in our interviews was identity confusion. Listen to Knoxville tell her story, and you will hear about a city that has struggled to find a clear identity. Knoxville has often been like an awkward teenager, insecure about who she is, embarrassed by her goofy family, trying hard to succeed but often failing in the process. We want to be like other, more attractive cities. We have struggled to overcome rejection.

The roots of our identity confusion go way back. When Charles McClung laid out our first city streets, he did not ask, “What plan will work best with these lovely rolling hills?” He instead copied a map of Philadelphia, the new nation’s most prestigious city.

William Blount chose to name his new city Knoxville, hoping to flatter his boss, Secretary of War Henry Knox, and earn special favors for himself and for the city. Gen-

eral Knox never visited the city, however, and didn't seem to care much about having a city named after him. Though Blount did succeed in getting Knoxville named the capital of Tennessee, this honor was taken away when Murfreesboro became the new state capital in 1817.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, Knoxville was once again poised for greatness. City leaders had worked hard to bring a major railroad into the city and build new factories. Then came the Civil War. Both armies set up camp near the city during the winter of 1863-64. In October, Knoxville became the focal point of a prolonged siege. When Longstreet's troops finally abandoned the city after the failed battle of Fort Sanders, the railroad lay in ruins and the new factories had been reduced to rubble.¹⁶

By the dawn of the twentieth century, Knoxville had managed to recover from the Civil War, and the city seemed destined for greatness in the New South. The talk was that Knoxville would become the next Atlanta, the "new jewel on the crown of the New South."¹⁷ New factories opened while the population grew nine fold between 1860-1900.¹⁸

This dream did not come to pass. The "Million Dollar Fire" of 1897 destroyed a block of businesses on Gay Street. Coal soot covered the streets and buildings. New streetcar lines allowed wealthier citizens to escape to new suburbs like Fourth and Gill and Fort Sanders. At the same time, racial tensions increased, and Klan membership ballooned. City leadership became insular and self-protective.

In 1946, the well-known travel writer John Gunther devastated Knoxville's self-image. In his best selling travel book, *Inside USA*, Gunther wrote: "Knoxville is the ugliest city I ever saw in America, with the possible exceptions of some mill towns in New England. Its main street is called Gay Street; this seemed to me to be a misnomer[...] It is one of the least orderly cities in the South. Knoxville leads every other town in Tennessee in homicides, automobile thefts, and larceny."¹⁹

Knoxville recovered from Gunther's unflattering description. City leaders created the Dogwood Arts Festival to celebrate our region's natural beauty, but this and other initiatives didn't reverse downtown Knoxville's slow decline. During the middle years of the twentieth century, anyone who could flee the city moved to the suburbs.

City leaders hoped another project would revive the city: the World's Fair. They looked to Jake Butcher, a wealthy banker, for help. Dubbed "Expo 82," the fair opened on May 1, 1982. More than eleven million visitors came through the gates over the next six months. The Radison, Hilton, and Holiday Inn were built in anticipation of the crowds. One historian observed, "For a brief moment, Knoxville's inferiority complex was forgotten."²⁰

The day after the World's Fair closed, 180 FDIC bank examiners infiltrated Jake Butcher's \$3 billion banking empire. U.S. Attorney John Gill identified Butcher as the biggest thief in the history of Tennessee. Six thousand people lost their savings and dozens of businesses failed.²¹

As I listened to this sad story and others that summer, the figure who came to best represent our civic insecurity was The Prophet.

As I listened to this sad story and others that summer, the figure who came to best represent our civic insecurity was The Prophet. In the late nineteenth century, The Prophet came down from the mountains and made an appearance at the city's fall carnival in October. He wore a long white beard, carried a staff, and wore a long robe decorated with astrological symbols. Two long horns curled out from his head. A reporter, writing in 1897, explained, "His home is, as it has been for ages, in the heart of the Great Smokies, far up the steps amid the eternal blue of everlasting peaks and ranges, above the thunder and the storm."

Every fall the mayor gave The Prophet a key to the city. He accepted it with gusto and always said flattering things about the city, his peculiar pride and joy: "To this, our favorite and peculiar city[...] a splendid and progressive city, enthroned upon historic hills."

He became famous for his prophecies. He predicted that women would get the vote, and that a great highway system would one day link Knoxville with the rest of the

country. The bearded visitor prophesied, “Yes, as in the olden time, all roads led to imperial Rome, so in time to come, all roads in this splendid section shall lead to queenly Knoxville.”²²

When I read Jack Neely’s column about this mysterious figure, who wandered down out of the mountains every autumn for twenty years to tell the city that she was destined to be the next Rome, I thought of the insecure person at the party who always has to tell you how great he or she was, or is, or is going to be. I thought also of the times in my own life when I have wished I were someone else, someone smarter, faster, or braver. The Prophet’s words made me sad, not proud.

How does a city heal from the wounds of shame and insecurity? The same way people do, I think. By God’s grace, we begin to accept ourselves for who God has created us to be. We embrace our gifts and develop them instead of constantly wishing we were somebody or somewhere else. This is happening in our city. We are starting to understand that *this place matters* and are celebrating our unique buildings and spaces.

Take a walk through Market Square on a Friday night, and you won’t feel that you are in a city trying to be something it is not. Knoxville has become a destination for bluegrass music. Our city celebrates and supports local farmers, shopkeepers, and restaurants. We have a renewed appreciation for the beauty of our region and are building parks and bike trails. Each of these encouraging

signs is present because someone like you responded to God's call and turned that call into something tangible. These signs are clues about what it means to seek the peace of the city: It happens when you align your unique gifts and calling with God's unique calling on our city.

Apathy

The last wound that we heard about in our city's story was apathy. A reporter from *Fortune* magazine visited Knoxville in 1952 and summed us up like this: "Almost everyone thinks something should be done, but nobody does anything much. They like it fine the way it is."²³ More recently, a writer from the *New York Times* spent a weekend in our city talking to locals and came to this conclusion: "(KNOXVILLE) is a place too unassuming to shout about but too comfortable to leave [...] Knoxville, cheerfully ensconced in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains and banked against the Tennessee River, has an intrinsically lazy, soulful feel. The geography is soft, green and rolling. The climate is gentle, breezy and bright. Locals tend to be not just friendly...but chilled out, too."²⁴

I recently spoke with a community leader whose consulting work often takes him to other cities. I asked him to compare Nashville and Chattanooga with Knoxville. "The main difference," he noted, "is that Knoxville has never had a real crisis. For change to happen, you need a crisis. Things have never gotten that bad around here."²⁵ I heard the same sentiment expressed in a dozen different ways

that summer. Life in Knoxville is good enough. Why risk change?

And so only a few of us vote.

And so only a few of us run for office.

And so when change is proposed, our leaders often vote it down.

And so entrepreneurs have a hard time finding start up capital.

And so the word gets out that if you want to do something exciting you should move to Nashville or Atlanta.

And so we don't worry about a failing urban school when our children's schools are doing well.

We demand excellence from our football team, but we settle for the status quo in just about every other arena in our community.

What does this mean for seeking the peace of the city? We must be careful here, because we don't want to confuse the world's definition of success for God's definition. There is nothing wrong with being content with what God has given you. But there is something wrong with not striving to be all you can be. Something is wrong when real injustices in our city go unchallenged simply because we are too comfortable to take them by

the horns. Something is wrong when we are too cynical to risk hope.

This is the story our city told me. She might tell you a different one. Either way, let's make sure we listen.



CHAPTER TWO: Hope

A friend of mine who has been actively serving our community for many years told me recently that she was tired and discouraged. “We’ve spent millions of dollars and thousands of hours trying to solve the problems of our city,” she sighed. “We’ve prayed. We’ve preached. We’ve given. But I don’t feel like we’ve moved the needle at all.”

I think my friend, out of frustration and fatigue, overstated the case. But I certainly can identify with how

she feels. Seeking the peace of the city can seem like an impossible goal. In one sense, it is an impossible goal. We live in a fallen world. Though defeated, Satan still works through systems, structures, and even people, to keep humanity from flourishing. The kingdom of God, meaning the reign of Christ upon the earth, is marked by peace, yet the kingdom has come only in part. For now, the Church advances Christ's kingdom by taking three steps forward and two steps back.

Trying to bring shalom to one's little corner of the world can feel overwhelming, to say the least. Expand the vision to include the needs of an entire city, and you'll need a nap! That being said, Jesus teaches us to pray to the Father, "Your kingdom come, your will on earth be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION MATT. 6:10).

The kingdom seems to come so slowly, and I often struggle with discouragement. For example, one of the ways I seek the peace of the city is by praying for the salvation of eight of my friends. Today some seem farther away from God than ever before. Another way I seek the peace of the city is by coaching an inner city swim team. That's where I met Martin. Let me tell you the rest of the story, at least the rest of the story so far. Martin started smiling. He was having fun. He swam faster and faster and started beating kids who had been swimming for years. I made some phone calls to some other coaches to see if Martin might join a year-round swim program. Everyone was eager to step up. Then Martin suddenly

stopped showing up. Nobody at his house returned our calls. Martin missed the rest of the meets. At our year-end swim banquet, we gave Martin the “Most Improved Swimmer” award, but Martin wasn’t there to receive it. A friend and I drove the award over to his house after the banquet. After many knocks, his “caregiver” opened the door. He wasn’t happy to see us. We handed him Martin’s trophy and told him how well Martin had swum. “I don’t know where he is,” he said. He took the trophy and shut the door. The kingdom comes so slowly. Sometimes, it’s hard to see it coming at all.

Hope in the End of the Story

We need help if we are to persevere in seeking the peace of our city, and that help comes in the shape of God’s



*We need help
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hope. God never promises us that his kingdom will come fully in this lifetime. 1 Corinthians 15:24 tells us that we have to wait for his son's return. But God does promise us that one day his peace will reign over all the earth (ISA. 2:2-4, 6-9; 32:16-17). One day shalom will cover and fill the whole earth!

Knowing the end of the world's story reenergizes us and gives us hope.

After a lengthy teaching about Christ's certain return and the world's future hope, Paul concluded "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (1 COR. 15:58). In other words, "Given the certainty that God will one day restore the kingdom on earth, work with joy and confidence now for the kingdom!" New Testament scholar N.T Wright describes our future hope and our present work this way:



God builds God's kingdom. But God orders his world in such a way that his own work within that world takes place [...] through human beings who reflect his image [...] He has enlisted us to act as his stewards in the project of creation. And, following the disaster of rebellion and corruption, he has built into the gospel message the fact that through the work of Jesus and the power of the Spirit, he equips humans to help in the work of getting the project back on track [...] The final coming together of heaven and on earth is, of course, God's supreme act of new

creation [...] It would be the height of folly to think that we could assist in that great work. But what we can and must do in the present, if we are obedient to the gospel, if we are following Jesus, and if we are indwelt, energized and directed by the Spirit, is to build for the kingdom.²⁶

This is our hope: Christ is building his kingdom on earth and has invited us to join him. The ultimate victory of this project has been made certain by the cross (COL. 1:19-20). We seek the peace of our city today knowing that Christ will complete the work tomorrow. Because of our hope in what God will do in the future, we confidently pursue our work for him today. The second practice of shalom-making is hope.

Isaiah's Vision of the New Jerusalem

One ancient prophecy heralding peace shows up in Isaiah 65:17-25. Isaiah was an eighth-century B.C. urban prophet who counseled Israel's leaders during a time of national crisis. Cruel and terrible to its victims, the Assyrian army threatened from the north. Israel's kings ignored Isaiah's warnings, turned away from God, and made backroom

This is our hope: Christ is building his kingdom on earth and has invited us to join him.

deals to keep the peace. Assyria attacked Israel anyway, destroying the ten northern tribes forever. The tiny southern kingdom with the once-great city of Jerusalem as its capital hung on by a thread. Isaiah often met with kings in Jerusalem and knew the city well. His descriptions of the city reveal an anxious people in serious spiritual, political, and economic decline. The beleaguered city had earned the nicknames “Forsaken” and “Desolate” (ISA. 62:4). Her priests cried out to God in bewilderment, “Where is your compassion?” (ISA. 63:15).

Isaiah pulled no punches and preached severe sermons, calling the city to repentance for worshipping false gods and ignoring their covenant with Yahweh. Sometimes these sermons hit their mark, and the people mourned their sin. Yet the citizens of Jerusalem in Isaiah’s day were a discouraged people with little knowledge of God’s peace. Against this grim backdrop, God comforts his people by giving them a vision of the new city he will one day create. “For behold,” God begins, “I create new heavens and a new earth, and the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create, for I create Jerusalem to be a joy, and her people a gladness” (ISA 65:17-18).

God tells us three times that He is the one who creates this city. This Hebrew word for *create* is used only when God is the subject. Only God does this kind of creating. It’s the same word used in the first verse of Genesis: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” The same almighty power that created the universe will

again be on display when God creates the New Jerusalem. The prophecy goes on to describe six characteristics of the New Jerusalem.

Joy

Anxiety and sadness pervaded Isaiah's Jerusalem. The city's decline began with the death of King Jeroboam in 746 B.C. Israel had five kings over the next ten years, and three of them took the throne by violence (2 KINGS 15:8-28). Civil war soon ravaged the country. The prophet Hosea described a city in which law and order had completely collapsed (HOSEA 4:1-3). Divided against itself and estranged from God, the northern kingdom was too weak to stand against the Assyrians.

Jerusalem suffered as well. Assyria demanded heavy taxes. King Ahaz had to strip the temple and sell off its decorations and furniture to pay them (2 KINGS 16:8,17). Joy was not a common thing in Jerusalem, but God promises that the New Jerusalem will be full of it: "Be glad and rejoice forever in what I create," he sings. "The New Jerusalem I make will be full of joy, and her people will be happy. I myself will be filled with joy because of Jerusalem and her people. There will be no weeping there, no calling for help" (GOOD NEWS TRANSLATION ISA. 65:18-19).

Health

Life expectancy was short in the ancient world. This was especially true in a city living in the shadow of the most terrifying army in the world. Many children died from

famine and disease, and few grew to old age. God promises that the citizens of the New Jerusalem will be healthy: “Babies will no longer die in infancy, and all people will live out their lifespan. Those who live to be a hundred

will be considered young. To die before that would be a sign that I had punished them” (ISA. 65:20).

Economic Opportunity

As Isaiah’s listeners knew all too well, one terrifying afternoon of battle could erase a lifetime of work. You could be the owner of your own house and garden one day, and be out on the street with someone else sleeping in your bed the next. God promises his people that in the New Jerusalem the people will have the opportunity to work and enjoy the fruits of their labor: “People will build houses and get to live in them—they will

not be used by someone else. They will plant vineyards and enjoy the wine—it will not be drunk by others. Like trees, my people will live long lives. They will fully enjoy the things that they have worked for. The work they do will be successful,” (ISA. 65:21-22).



The Blessing of Children

The mothers and fathers of Jerusalem lived in constant fear for the lives of their little ones, who frequently died from disease, famine, and war. This will not be the case, God says, in the New Jerusalem. “Their children will not meet with disaster,” God assures parents. “I will bless them and their descendants for all time to come” (ISA. 65:23).

Intimate Knowledge of God

Holy Jerusalem, the city created to worship God and the home of God’s temple, was coming apart at its spiritual seams. The religious leaders worked for the state and were in no position to make an honest, prophetic assessment of Israel’s spiritual health. They seemed to think that if the priests just kept offering sacrifices everything would be fine (ISA. 1:10-17). In the first verses of Chapter 65, God Himself diagnoses the spiritual condition of the city: “I was ready to answer my people’s prayers, but they did not pray. I was ready for them to find me, but they did not even try. The nation did not pray to me, even though I was always ready to answer, ‘Here I am; I will help you’” (ISA. 65:1-2).

God looks forward to the day when “even before they finish praying to me, I will answer their prayers” (GNT ISA. 65:24). One day, everyone in the city will come into an intimate knowledge of God.

Reconciliation, Unity, and Safety

When communities are under extreme pressure, people turn on each other. Leaders panic and grasp for power.

Factions tear apart the fabric of the city. Neighbor exploits neighbor. This appears to have happened during Isaiah's reign. Isaiah's Jerusalem was a violent city. Micah, who prophesied in Jerusalem at the same time, described the city like this: "When they want fields, they seize them; when they want houses, they take them. No one's family or property is safe.... Get up and go; there is no safety here any more (MIC. 2:2-10).

The New Jerusalem offers an entirely different way of life: "Wolves and lambs will eat together; lions will eat straw, as cattle do, and snakes will no longer be dangerous." God concludes, "On Zion, my sacred hill, there will be nothing harmful or evil" (ISA. 65:25). In God's New City, enemies will be reconciled and will enjoy fellowship. Citizens will walk the streets in safety. God's peace will reside in the city.

Hope and the New Jerusalem

I write these words during Advent with the knowledge that believers will soon hear the prophet say of the Messiah, "Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end" (ISA. 9:7). We will also hear the angels sing over the startled shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (KING JAMES VERSION LUKE 2:14). We will celebrate our confident hope that the kingdom of peace has indeed broken into our scarred and troubled world. Isaiah's stunning poem gives us a tantalizing glimpse of what peace on earth might look like.

It might look like a city filled with public festivals and happiness. A city with good health care. And plenty of jobs. And laughing children. And intimate worship. And neighbors who get along. This is our hope.



CHAPTER THREE:

Presence

Drew and Nikki Petty could live pretty much anywhere they want to in Knoxville. Nikki has a master's degree and worked several years as a consultant before they had children. Drew owns his own business. The Pettys have a heart for the more vulnerable members of our community who are not experiencing many of the characteristics of shalom described in Isaiah's vision. They decided

to move into a shalom-deprived neighborhood. Drew recently wrote me an email describing their experience:



We live one mile from [Knoxville Center Mall] and are surrounded by spiritually and materially poor folks. We have intentionally become neighbors to them and found ways to serve them and share Christ with them. Joe and his wife and son lived in the rental trailer next door for a year and a half. Joe has a meth addiction. He once beat his father unconscious and left him in a pool of blood. The next folks to move into the run-down trailer had two boys, substance abuse issues, car troubles, and relational troubles. They just moved out today. Mike lives in the next trailer up. He is mentally challenged and worked as a custodian for 26 years at a nearby elementary school. Mike was fired for forgetting to vacuum the runs at the front door of the school and now lives on disability. He comes to my shop almost daily. Adam rented the house across the street and sold drugs while delivering pizza and raising two kids with his girlfriend. I have witnessed him abuse his wife and kids. My fifteen-year friendship with Tim and Mammie, two friends who have lived under the poverty line their entire lives, led them to us to take in their son, Peyton [...] It is a humbling opportunity to get to serve these folks [...] I tell you all these things to say that we have deep convictions that “incarnational ministry” and suffering with the poor is best lived out among them.²⁷

Incarnational ministry involves a sacrificial commitment to be present in places of need. This seems to be what God had in mind when he said this to the exiles:

Build houses.

Plant gardens.

Take wives.

Have sons and daughters.

Multiply there.

Put down roots.

Settle in for the long haul.

Establish a presence in the city.

Drew and Nikki are a good illustration of our third practice of shalom-making in the city: presence.

*When we practice presence,
we are imitating Jesus.*



Practicing Presence as Incarnational Ministry

When we practice presence, we are imitating Jesus. Jesus saved the world by becoming present in the world. John describes how Jesus practices presence in the fourteenth verse of the first chapter of his gospel: “And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Here is the same verse from *The Message*: “The Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood.” J.B. Phillips puts it this way: “So the word of God became a human being and lived among us.” Jesus is not a long distance savior. He becomes present in the world he wants to save:

When the time came, he set aside the privileges of deity and took on the status of a slave, became human! Having become human, he stayed human. It was an incredibly humbling process. He didn’t claim special privileges. Instead, he lived a selfless, obedient life and then died a selfless, obedient death—and the worst kind of death at that—a crucifixion.” (PHIL. 2:5-8)

We call Jesus’ sacrificial decision to be present with us in order to save us the incarnation, and one of the ways that we seek the peace of our city is by practicing incarnational ministry—by being present, being a neighbor, and not leaving. The authors of the book, *God So Loves the City*, had this to say about urban mission: “The idea of incarnation, of walking with and dwelling among people, of identifying with their sufferings, is essential for mission in the city.”²⁸

The phrase “incarnational ministry” has received a lot of criticism in recent years. There are valid reasons for this. Some people think that simply being a Christian and living in a neighborhood, working in a building, or buying your coffee from the same shop each day is blessing the city. But being present in the city involves more than just physical location.

Think again about the mission of Jesus. Here is Matthew’s summary of our Lord’s incarnational ministry: “And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (ESV *MATT.* 9:35-36).

Jesus is present for a purpose. He ministers to the physical needs of hurting people. He ministers to the spiritual needs of hurting people. He heals. He preaches the gospel. He wants to bring physical healing, and he wants to see them restored to right relationship with God. This is the practice of presence: being present in the city for the purpose of caring for the physical and spiritual needs of our neighbors.

Though I do not believe that everyone is called to live like Drew and Nikki do, I do believe that our housing choices are spiritual decisions that reflect our values and our commitment to Christ. You may not be called to move into an at-risk neighborhood, but are you prayerful about where



Are you open to moving if God called you? Christ is Lord of all, including our housing choices.

you do live? Are you honest about your motivations and your fears? Does your address align with your personal needs and your personal mission? Are you open to moving if God called you? Christ is Lord of all, including our housing choices.

The Problem with Projects

There are other ways to cultivate a faithful, long-term presence in places of need in our city. I chose the words “faithful” and “long-term” for a reason. People in shalom-deprived neighborhoods are weary of drive-by compassion. They are tired of feeling like somebody’s project.

I learned this firsthand while volunteering for several years at an afterschool ministry in an African American church. The pastor was very friendly, but most of the church members who ran the program kept their distance. Did they not trust me? Was I doing something wrong? I shared

my concerns with a friend who had lived and served in the community for many years.

“You are right. They don’t trust you,” he said.

“They’ve seen dozens of guilt-ridden white guys like you come and go over the years. They don’t expect you to stay around.” Now that I’ve been working in the neighborhood for five years, I am starting to feel more accepted. I have learned that the gift I can give to the neighborhood is to keep showing up.

In recent years, I have come to believe that event-driven compassion ministry is not the best way to bring shalom to the city.

I’ve spent much of my life in the white evangelical suburban church, so permit me to make an observation about my own tribe. White suburban churches love projects. We love events, service days, mission weeks, and building houses. We love slideshows, t-shirts, and barbeque dinners, celebrating what has been accomplished. I know. I have been right there in the thick of it, and I have the t-shirts to prove it.

In recent years, I have come to believe that event-driven compassion ministry is not the best way to bring shalom to the city. In fact, I think it often does more harm than good. One-time projects, heavily funded by wealthy suburban churches, disempower and disrespect the churches and people they aim to help. Whenever we do something *for* a struggling neighbor that we could have done *with* them, we have not helped them, no matter how sincere our intentions. What at-risk neighborhoods need are people who are willing to commit to a long-term, relational presence in the neighborhood. Practicing presence means listening. Practicing presence means waiting. Practicing presence means watching and joining in with whatever God is already doing in the neighborhood. It's slow and messy, and you usually don't take home a t-shirt. It is also the best way to seek the peace of a neighborhood that you likely don't know very well.

When I moved my office downtown ten years ago, Downtown Knoxville itself was a shalom-deprived neighborhood.

Practicing Presence Downtown

When I moved my office downtown ten years ago, Downtown Knoxville itself was a shalom-deprived neighborhood. Twenty years of migration out of the city towards the cheaper land and office space of the suburbs had taken their toll. A handful of people, many of them Christians, decided they wouldn't move their banks and law firms and accounting practices out of the city, even if they could get a better deal. They decided to practice presence in the city. Day after day, they bring their love, prayers, and generosity, their witness and their wisdom, *into* the city. The city needs these things.

These people also create jobs in the city, and the people who take those jobs support the restaurants, salons, and dry cleaners in the city. Business and their employees create a ripple effect of peace and prosperity.

Does God really care about trivial stuff like where we live, work, and shop? God obviously cares about people, and people live throughout our region. He doesn't love the people who work on Gay Street more than the ones who work at Turkey Creek, but if we consider what we have learned over the past sixty years about how cities relate to the rest of the region, then the inner city, especially the downtown, is the heart of the region. If the heart atrophies, the entire region suffers. If the city center becomes morally and spiritually dark, the region also becomes morally and spiritually dark. If all the businesses move out of the city to get cheaper rent on paved-

over farmland, we lose the farmland forever. We leave beautiful, historic buildings haunted and empty. The tax base shrinks because the only people left in the city are the ones who cannot afford to get out. Education suffers, crime increases, and the region sinks into a kind of economic apartheid. Our downtown tells a different story and enjoys a greater measure of shalom today because a handful of wise business leaders practiced presence.

Presence through Patronage

Another way to be present in the city is to support the artists, chefs, and directors who work long hours to bring joy to our city. Let me reiterate: there is nothing redemptive about coming downtown on a Friday night to hear a concert and get drunk. But we commit to showing up at our city's festivals. We can participate in them incarnationally. We can come as Christ, looking for ways to care for the physical and spiritual needs of others at the festival.

We patronize local bookstores.

We can collect the work of local artists who exhibit on First Fridays.

We can become regulars at a new restaurant and build relationships with the staff.

We can give generous tips!

David and Travetta Johnson have figured out a creative way to be present in their corner of the city. *The News*



Sentinel featured a story on them entitled, “Backyard Art: Parkridge Couple Opens Neighborhood Arts Venue.” Here are a few lines from the story:



David and Travetta Johnson think the arts can bring people together. It’s how they met. That was forty years ago when they were 15-year olds in a high school choir in Lubbock, Texas. Now they want to bring their neighborhood together with a backyard venue for the arts [...] They’ve lived in their “creaky old restored Victorian” [...] for close to three years. A big reason they bought the place was because of the barn in the back, which they are now calling SHAREhouse, an acronym representing Story, Hope, Art, Revelry, and Education [...] “I love the arts and

what they do for the world,” Travetta said. What she hopes they can do for Parkridge is demonstrate hospitality, celebrate diversity and stoke creativity.²⁹

The Johnsons are practicing presence through the arts.

Practicing Presence Through Service

Another way of practicing presence is to find a place to serve in a shalom-deprived community. For example, one mother in the All Souls family volunteers to help out with the fourth and fifth grade classrooms at the Green Magnet Math and Science Academy where 97% of the children are on reduced or free lunches. A newly married computer programmer and his friends take hamburgers to a homeless camp. A college senior mans the night desk at KARM. A hospital administrator teaches creative writing one night a week at the Volunteer Ministry Center. A retired teacher tutors elementary kids on Wednesdays. A veterinarian mentors a fourth grader whose father is in prison. A college professor leads a poetry group for abused women. A restaurant manager coaches volleyball in an inner city league. An attorney delivers meals to shut-ins. Each of these people practice presence through serving.

Love War

A group of young musicians have found a remarkable way of practicing presence in the city. They worship. United Pursuit Band began leading worship on Tuesday nights in a friend’s living room in 2005. Dozens of young people began coming to worship for three hours or more. The

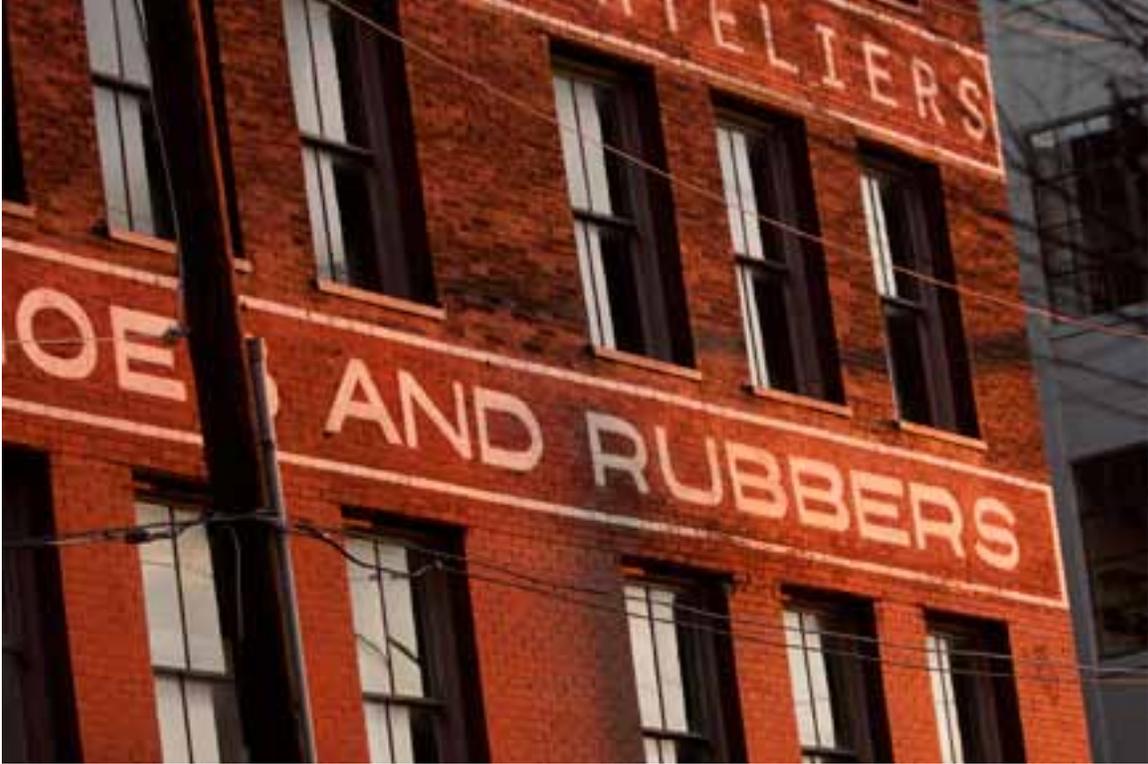
musicians called it “Love War.” Soon Love War outgrew the living room and moved to a church. Now they’ve outgrown the church and plan to renovate an old building on one of Knoxville’s most troubled blocks. Hundreds of worshippers sing God’s praises long into the night in a place usually filled with the wails of sirens.

Paul explained the power of urban worship to the Ephesians: “Through followers of Jesus like yourselves gathered in churches, this extraordinary plan of God is becoming known and talked about even among the angels!” (THE MESSAGE EPH. 3:10). Paul speaks of good angels and bad angels in Ephesians. They engage in spiritual conflict over the city. When the church worships, she witnesses to the spiritual forces at work in a city.

Worship invites God’s presence into the city. God is seeking worshippers with whom to dwell. He commands Moses to build him a tabernacle so he can dwell in the worship of his people (EXODUS 25:8). The psalmist leads the congregation with these words, “You are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel” (ESV Ps. 22:3). Jesus tells the woman at the well that the Father is *seeking* those who worship in spirit and in truth (JOHN 4:23). When we are present in worship, God becomes present with us. This is one reason why our church worships in the center of the city. We believe we are inviting God’s presence into the city when we practice presence through worship.

We’re considering ten shalom-making practices in this book. Nobody is called to practice all of them, but prac-

ting presence may be easier than you think. Begin with prayer. Is there a neighborhood, school, or group of people who God puts on your heart? If so, find a way to serve them. Chances are, somebody is already at work there, trying to bring God's peace. And one more thing: once you find where God has called you, keep showing up.



CHAPTER FOUR:

Work

One of the most overlooked ways we can seek the peace of our city is through our work, yet many Christians today feel conflicted about work, which may explain why so few Christians see their work as a way to practice shalom-making. Some Christians are overly pessimistic about work and view it as part of capitalism, a part of the fallen, evil Empire that is America. Earning a living in corporate America, banking, or Oak Ridge is akin to sleeping with the enemy. In light of this pessimism, work becomes a necessary evil—something that good Christians do as little as possible, and only then to get by. Some people go so far as to say that work is unredeemable. They advocate

total separation from the capitalist system, dumpster diving, and a barter economy.

Other Christians are overly optimistic about work. They take their cues from commencement speakers who encourage graduates to find careers that enable them to connect their deepest passions with the world's greatest needs. Bright-eyed graduates enter the marketplace, expecting to find a job that pays them well for doing fulfilling work while tackling significant problems. Needless to say, these young workers often feel more disappointment than satisfaction.

Neither view has much to say about work's part in shalom-making. The first approach puts work and shalom at loggerheads. The second approach focuses on self-actualization, quickly becoming one-dimensional and losing sight of the common good. What happens when work becomes tedious and boring? What happens when passion doesn't pay the bills? The Bible charts a middle way between these two extremes.

Jeremiah's Theology of Work

In Jeremiah's letter to the exiles God says: "Build houses and live in them. Plant gardens and eat their produce..." (JEREMIAH 29:5). God told them, "Get to work. Build a house. Farm. Do the same things you were doing in Jerusalem to sustain yourselves. Do good work." Why were they to work hard in this new city? According to verse 7, they were to seek the peace and prosperity of their city. When their city prospered, they would too.

Historians of the Exile³⁰ tell us that this is exactly what the Jews did. John Bright observes in his book *A History of Israel* that the Jews “were not of course free, but they were not prisoners either. They were allowed to build houses, engage in agriculture, and apparently earn their living in any way they could.... In the course of time, many Jews entered trade, and some grew rich.”³¹

The scholar Rainer Albertz has devoted extensive study to the work patterns of the Exile. He concludes:



It would appear, then, that after some initial difficulties the legal and economic situation of the [exiles] was far from oppressive. All signs pointed to increasing legal and economic integration.... The knowledge that the Babylonian [exiles] at the end of the exile [were] able to make a sizable contribution to Jerusalem... and the fact that only a limited number were prepared to return demonstrate that most [of them] had found a way to make a good livelihood during their distant exile.”³² God told the Jews to bless their city through work, and they did.

Paul’s Theology of Work

Six hundred and fifty years later, the apostle Paul picked up the same theme when he addressed urban Christians living as exiles in cities across the Roman Empire. Paul and the other New Testament writers drew upon Israel’s experience in exile as a model for their own ministry in Greco-Roman cities. When living in Babylon, Israel “ex-

isted as a counter-cultural fellowship within other nation-states” observes Tim Keller. “In many ways this is also the form of the New Testament church, as Peter and James suggest when they address believers as ‘the Dispersion’ (JAMES 1:1) and ‘exiles’ (1 PETER 1:1)[...] The Jewish exiles were not to hate the pagan city as they bided their time. They were to be fully involved in its life, working in it and praying for it[...] This is exactly what today’s Christians are called to do as well.”³³ In his letters to urban churches, Paul builds upon Jeremiah’s theology of work and identifies three ways a Christian’s work can bless the city.

Work Assists with Our Financial Needs

Work meets financial needs so that we are not a burden on our communities. Paul wrote one of his letters to a small community of believers in the bustling city of Ephesus. He had evidently received a report that some in the community, for reasons unknown to us, were not working even though they were able. He corrected them, explaining that work gives us the opportunity to provide for ourselves and for our families. “But if anyone does not provide for his relatives,” the apostle wrote, “and especially for members of his household, he is worse than an unbeliever” (1 TIM. 5:8). A friend of mine puts it like this: “The first step towards helping others is not being a burden yourself.” If we work to meet our own material needs, then the city does not have to take care of us. This blesses our city. The biblical writers were of course aware that some citizens need help providing for themselves, and that reality brings us to the second way that work blesses our city.

Work Generates Resources We Can Share

Work generates resources that we can share with the weaker members of our city. Paul made his point in a warning against theft: “Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labor, doing honest work with his hands, so that he may have something to share with anyone in need” (ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION EPH. 4:28). He reminds the Ephesian elders of the same principle: “In all things I have shown you that by working hard in this way we must help the weak and remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (ACTS 20:35). We bless our city when we work hard, earn money, and give some of it away to care for the weaker members in our community. Work gives us the opportunity to show mercy and practice generosity.

Work Gives Us An Opportunity to Witness

Finally, work allows us to witness to our neighbors in the city. Some believers in the city of Thessalonica had stopped working. Perhaps they believed the Lord was going to return very soon! Paul gently corrected them: “Try your best to live quietly, to mind your own business, and to work hard, just as we taught you to do. Then you will be respected by people who are not followers of the Lord” (CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH VERSION, I THESS. 4:11-12).

Hard work, done for the Lord, is a witness to our neighbors in two very important ways. We witness by doing good work that earns the respect of others and makes them want to know why we work the way we do. Paul said as much in his letter to Christians working in the city of Colossae:



And don't just do the minimum that will get you by. Do your best. Work from the heart for your real Master, for God, confident that you'll get paid in full when you come into your inheritance. Keep in mind always that the ultimate Master you're serving is Christ. The sullen servant who does shoddy work will be held responsible. Being a follower of Jesus doesn't cover up bad work. (COLOSSIANS 3:22-25, THE MESSAGE)

We can also witness by resting from work. The bible calls the practice of resting from work “Sabbath keeping.” Success at work can become one of the false gods of the city. City dwellers worship this false god with an unending liturgy of emails, texts, phone calls, and proposals. We testify that we serve a higher god when we set aside one day a week to stop working, to rest, and to worship him.

Correcting Extreme Views About Work

In light of the New Testament teaching on work as a means of blessing the city, God might say to those who are too pessimistic about work: “Yes, you do live in a fallen world. You are exiles, living always in tension in a

city that is not your home. But you must not try to escape that tension. I sent you into the city to bless it, not withdraw from it, and one of the ways you shall do this is through your work.”

Those with the capacity to create jobs have a spiritual gift that desperately needs to be put to work in the city.

To those who are too optimistic about work, God might say: “Yes, work is a way of furthering God’s purposes on the earth, but don’t have unrealistic expectations about work in a fallen world. Very few people in the history of the world have been paid to do work that lines up with their passions. If you are one of them, praise God. Though it is fine to look for a job that fits your gifts and callings, no job will be a perfect fit. Finding the sweet spot can take decades. Remember that you can bless the city through your work even if you never find that sweet spot. You can do this by providing for your family, giving to others, and witnessing through your work.”

Job Creation as Spiritual Gift

Those with the capacity to create jobs have a spiritual gift that desperately needs to be put to work in the city. If it is true that God uses work to bless a city, then creating

work opportunities is a way to bless the city as well. One of the most generous, compassionate gifts that you can give another human being is good work. Job creation is a ministry in the kingdom of God.



*Job creation
is a ministry
in the kingdom
of God.*

Father Gregory Boyle provides a good illustration of the peace-making power of work in his book, *Tattoos on the Heart*. Father Greg has worked with gangs in Los Angeles for over twenty years, and he has buried over 168 gang members. In 1988 he became pastor of the Delores Mission Church in the poorest parish of Los Angeles. Father Greg opened the church to gang members as a gym, and they started to hang

out with him. He soon learned that gang members needed jobs, but they had given up looking for one. When gang riots erupted in L.A. in 1992, a businessman came to the priest and asked him how he could help. Father Greg took him to an old bakery across from the church, and asked the businessman to buy it. The man did, and Homeboy Bakeries was born. Over the last twenty years, Homegirl Café, Homeboy Silk Screen, and Homeboy

Maintenance have also opened their doors. Here's how Father Greg describes the impact of those businesses:



Los Angeles Country claims 1,100 gangs with nearly 86,000 members. A great number of those youth know to come to Homeboy when they are ready to “hang up their gloves.” Homeboy Industries is not for those who need help, only for those who want it. In this sense, we are a gang rehabilitation center. Often the homies who come to us are not-ready-for-primetime players. Just released from prison, they are offered what is often their first job, where they glean soft skills like learning to show up on time, every day, and taking orders from disagreeable supervisors.

We provide all of this free of charge. We are a worksite and a therapeutic community. We are a training program and a business. Once the homies come to feel some confidence in the workplace, they can move on to higher paying opportunities elsewhere. Also, we give homies a chance to work with their enemies. The place has become the “United Nations” of gangs.³⁴

Has God given you the capacity to create jobs? If so, how can you bless the city with your gift?

What the Church Can Do

The church can do a better job supporting her workers. We can begin by celebrating work as a valid way to serve God in the city. Too often, the church falls into a dualistic way of thinking about work. We sort vocations into a

Why shouldn't we ask stockbrokers and patent attorneys to share their testimonies, as well as the kids that just got back from mission trips?

hierarchy of holiness. At the top are martyred missionaries. Next best are plain old missionaries. Then come stateside pastors. After pastors come social workers and counselors. At the bottom of the hierarchy are lawyers, bankers, and real estate developers. If work can be ministry, however, then all work done for the glory of God and the service of others is kingdom work. Why shouldn't we ask stockbrokers and patent attorneys to share their testimonies, as well as the kids that just got back from mission trips?

We can also keep our church programs simple enough that they don't become second jobs for people who already work hard. Some faithful Christians work hard all week and then do "God's work" at night or on the weekends. This distinction doesn't show up in the bible. No wonder these people are tired! Work is one of the primary ways we bless the city. We need to create a church culture that equips people to make their jobs their primary ministries.

We also need to reshape church structures to support the way people work today. Many people don't work 9-5, Monday through Friday. We need to offer teaching and small group opportunities for people with irregular schedules who can't come on nights or weekends.

Finally, we need to create a mentoring culture where people in the same vocations can support one another. Pastors typically do a good job teaching you how to have a bible study, share your faith, and pray, but they often don't do a good job painting a picture of what it looks like to be a Christian entrepreneur or physicist. Pastors like myself don't do that because we can't! We've never been entrepreneurs or physicists, but we can encourage a fifty-year old entrepreneur to get coffee with a twenty-five year-old who wants to create a product and start a business.

A Word For the Frustrated

Remember, God has not abandoned us in our work even when we are not in the perfect job. God tells the exiles, who hated where they were, that he *sent* them there. I don't mean to minimize your frustration with being underemployed, unemployed, over-employed, or wrongly employed. Change jobs if you can. Finding a better fit is part of being a good steward of your gifts. But if God keeps closing the door, then maybe he has put you where you are to seek the peace of your office. Do good work. Make good tables. Seek the peace and prosperity of that stupid company and that difficult boss for whom God has you working.

*Even if we are not monks
and have taken no vow
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Monks have something to teach us here. Monastic writers often talk about the spiritual lessons God can teach us when we are bored or stuck or feel trapped in our life and work. Monks take a vow of stability, which means that they commit to staying put. Esther De Waal explains that this vow as “accepting this particular community, this place and these people, this and no other, as the way to God.” Monastics voluntarily limit themselves to one building and a few acres of ground for the rest of their lives. Even if we are not monks and have taken no vow of stability, God may have something to teach us if he is not opening the door to other work. He may be teaching us the same lesson that monks learn: “Contentment and fulfillment do not consist in constant change. True happiness cannot necessarily be found anywhere other than in this place and in this time.”³⁵ It’s hard to seek the peace of the city when we are not at peace ourselves.



CHAPTER FIVE:

Art

*The world-renowned painter Makoto Fujimura works in a loft three blocks from Ground Zero. Fujimura has mastered the ancient Japanese art of *Nibonga*, in which mineral pigments are applied to paper, and has wedded it to the Western style of abstract art. He was working on a painting in his studio when the towers fell on September 11,*

2001. He watched a plane engine descend like a meteor from the sky, narrowly missing a pedestrian.

In his book *Refractions* Fujimura explains how the horror of 9/11 shaped his calling: “God has called me as an artist and a follower of Christ to live and work for the ‘prosperity of the city’ (JER. 29) in the ashes of September 11, 2001.”³⁶ This artist has grasped the fifth peacemaking practice: art.

Creativity as Spiritual Gift

A number of the ten thousand refugees who settled into Babylon during the Exile would have been artists. God himself is an artist. The Bible’s opening line describes the creation of a work of art: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION GEN.1:1). A few verses later, we learn that the first human beings were created in the image of this creative God (GEN. 1:26-28). In the essay, *Toward a Biblical View of Aesthetics*, Frank Gaebelin draws this conclusion from the first chapters of Genesis:



God is the Great Maker, the only true Creator, from whom all other creative activity is derived. That we are made in his image is probably the greatest thing ever said of man, and takes us deep into the nature of our human creative ability. For one of the marks of God that we learn is that we, too, in our creaturely way, are makers. And in no human activity is the aspect of God’s image more evident than in our making of art.³⁷



We are not surprised, therefore, when God commissions skilled craftsmen to create works of art in the second book of the Old Testament. In fact, God calls for art when he gives Moses the Ten Commandments. On Mount Sinai, the Lord commanded: “And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell in their midst. Exactly as I show you concerning the pattern of the tabernacle, and of all its furniture, so you shall make it” (EXOD. 25:8-9). God demanded that his tabernacle be filled with beauty. Its furnishings were to include fine wood, gold overlay, finely crafted sculptures, and a lamp stand with almond flower cups, buds, blossoms, and branches. The priests were to wear garments made beautiful with gold, blue, purple, and scarlet yarn and fine linen. Blue, purple, and red pomegranates adorned their robes, and gold bells hung around the hems.

The priests also wore embroidered sashes. God clearly enjoys things of beauty and attention to artistic detail.

Travetta Johnson, the first worship director at All Souls Church, explains: “God commissioned art to be made by skilled craftsmen to adorn the dwelling place of God. Art was a vehicle of encounter with the Presence of God, communicating the beauty, sovereignty and holiness of God. The artists did not try to ‘draw’ God for people; rather, art communicated the truth about God.”³⁸ God equips some of this people the skill to create these works of arts.



Then Moses said to the people of Israel, ‘See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Ur, of the tribe of Judah; and he has filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold and silver and bronze, in cutting stones for setting, and in carving wood, for work in every skilled craft.’ (EXOD. 35:30-33)

The ability to create art is a spiritual gift.

A God Who Delights in Artists

God also commissioned art in another epoch in Israel’s history. He instructed his artists to adorn his temple with precious stones and freestanding columns (2 CHRON. 3-4). He commanded that an image of a bronze snake be placed on a pole (NUM. 21:8). He inspires his poets to write the

psalms. He commissioned talented musicians to lead his sons and daughters in the songs of the Lord (PS. 33:3; 96:1; 98:1; 149:1). He instructed his prophet Ezekiel to put on a play that will be a sign to Israel (EZEK. 4:1-3). He bid his people to celebrate him with dance (Ps. 149:3).

He called the two artists who oversee the creative work in the tabernacle by name (EXOD. 31:2,6). The name of the first artist, Bezalel, means “in the shadow of God.” We can infer that God’s artists work under his patronage and protection. The second artist was named Oholiab, which means, “My tent is the Father-God.” Here we gather that God is the artist’s shelter and refuge.³⁹ God seems to have a special place in his heart for his artists.

Art in the City: The Early Christians

The primary focus of Israel’s artistic community was worship—first in the tabernacle and later in the temple—but Jewish artists living in exile in Babylon probably lacked the resources or the theological vision to bless their city with much art. After Jesus’ death on the cross, however, the *people* of God become the *temple* of God (1 COR. 3:16; 2 COR. 6:16). God’s people may still be exiles in a certain sense, but the indwelling Spirit enables them to find ways to bring art into the cities where they are living in exile! Struggling to survive and often worshipping in secret, the earliest Christians carved into the walls of the catacombs the symbol of the fish, or an outline of a shepherd: simple signs of faith that would not arouse the suspicion of outsiders. They used art to communicate and congregate.

Art and the City: From Constantine to the Reformation

After the conversion of Constantine in 312 A.D., Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. The emperor commissioned artists to tell the biblical story on the walls and in the windows of the great churches he built in many cities. He believed that sacred art helped Christians worship and helped illiterate people learn the biblical story. After some people began to worship the images, an ecumenical council met in 787 A.D. and decided that art could be used but not worshipped in the Church. From the time of Constantine to the Reformation, a period referred to as Christendom, Christian artists, supported by the Church, painted, sculpted, and wrote about biblical events. Cities filled with their art.

From the time of Constantine to the Reformation, a period referred to as Christendom, Christian artists, supported by the Church, painted, sculpted, and wrote about biblical events. Cities filled with their art.

The Protestant Reformers were concerned that Christians were once again worshipping art instead of God. They also felt that the money the Church spent on art should be spent on the poor instead. They took paintings and sculptures out of their churches. This represented a major setback for artists who had enjoyed the Church's

patronage for a thousand years. The Reformers did encourage artists by stressing that Christ is Lord of all, and this belief freed Christian artists to choose subjects beyond biblical themes. Rembrandt, for example, dignified common people by making them the subjects of his paintings.

The Reformers were not as open to the theater and literature. The Puritans, in particular, hated the theater because they felt that it promoted immorality and undermined the social order. They were also suspicious of novels because they thought that in order to enjoy a novel the reader had to believe in a lie.

Artists often feel that their unique way of perceiving the world inevitably places them on the margins of community, but we need to extend hospitality to them.

Art and the City: Where Are We Today?

Fast-forward several centuries, and the church remains conflicted about art. Though the church ought to be the cradle of creativity, a school for artists, and a support network for craftsmen as they seek the peace of the city through their art, artists often feel unsupported by the

church. The failure of churches to nurture the arts was exposed in an article written by a senior art student at a Christian college for the school's student newspaper. The artist arrived on campus thrilled with her calling and eager to explore her gifts, but by the end of her sophomore year, "she was sick of her peer's indifference to her calling. She was fed up with comments that suggested that art is a waste of time, a field for slackers and weirdoes." The artist wrote in her journal, "I felt I had to justify myself [...] that is a terrible thing. I am a child of God. God made me a person who sees the world in a manner that is different from most perceptions. He gave me the urge to create." The young woman's Christian community neither recognized nor affirmed this gift.⁴⁰

Thankfully, many artists who follow Christ tell a different story. They are finding a new freedom to bless the city with their art. Consider these three ways that art can create shalom in the city.

Art can nourish worship in the city.

One way that artists seek the peace of the city is by helping God's people worship in the city. As we have already learned, God instructs his people to create art to because art enriches worship, and worship is good for the city. If all beauty originates from God, then all beauty found in the world reflects God's beauty; it reminds us of Him.⁴¹ Beauty awakens our longing for God.

Christian artists use beauty in various forms and disciplines to nourish worship. One of the oldest is stained

glass. Artists piece together small pieces of colored glass to tell a biblical story, or simply to transform the light beaming into a cathedral. On the right day the beautiful windows of St. John's Cathedral will take your breath away.

Other artists use abstract styles to draw God's people into worship. Ashley Addair Walker painted a triptych for our prayer chapel. It invites you to wade into the pool of prayer and has many layers of meaning and significance. Each week, as I sit before it, Ashley's work offers new ways to explore God.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn explains this witnessing power of beauty in his Nobel lecture on literature:



Art can warm even a chilled and sunless soul to an exalted spiritual experience. Through art we occasionally receive—indistinctly, briefly—revelations the like of which cannot be achieved by rational thought. It is like the small mirror of legend: You look into it, but instead of yourself, you glimpse for a moment the inaccessible, a realm forever beyond your reach. And your soul begins to ache.⁴²

Art exposes injustice in the city.

The Church serves a prophetic role in the city by pointing out injustice. The church typically fulfills this

prophetic function with words. Pastors preach about injustice, or someone writes a letter to the editor of a newspaper. One of the most powerful ways the Church exposes injustice, however, is through her artists. One photograph, poem, or painting can show an injustice in the city in a way more powerful and poignant than a thousand sermons. Let me offer one small glimpse into this power. First, read these statistics about homelessness from the KARM website:

- ☞ There are about 1,500 homeless persons in our area in any given month, a 50% increase over the last decade.
- ☞ In 1996 at least one-third of homeless individuals suffered some form of serious mental illness. Due to the decreasing availability of mental health services, the number of homeless suffering from some sort of emotional problem is currently estimated at about 50%.
- ☞ Currently, 75% of the homeless population is male and 25% is female. The number of homeless women in the Knoxville area is on the rise.
- ☞ 26% of Knoxville's homeless served in the armed forces.
- ☞ Reasons cited for homelessness include alcohol and drug addiction, lack of housing

due to eviction or financial struggles, job loss, family relationship problems, and health or mental illness.

- ☞ 47% of the homeless say they have been a victim of some form of crime, including robbery and assault.

Charles Dickens used his pen to expose injustice in his city. His novel *Bleak House* addresses a number of the social problems in 19th century London. Dickens noticed the great gulf between London's poorest classes and the upper class. Some of the upper class ignored the immediate needs of their fellow Londoners while they went to tea parties and talked about serving the natives of Africa. Dickens creates Mrs. Jellyby to illustrate this hypocrisy. Mrs. Jellyby spends all her time writing letters and raising money for the BorrioboolaGha, a tribe on the left bank of the Niger whom she has never met. Meanwhile, she neglects her five children, who run wild. Esther Summerson, the novel's narrator, visits Mrs. Jellyby and watches in horror as one of Mrs. Jellyby's children falls down the stairs:



As we came into Mrs. Jellyby's presence, one of the poor little things fell downstairs—down a whole flight (AS IT SOUNDED TO ME), with a great noise. Mrs. Jellyby, whose face reflected

*none of the uneasiness which we could not help showing in our own faces, as the dear child's head recorded its passage with a bump on every stair [...] received us with perfect equanimity. She was a pretty, very diminutive, plump woman from forty to fifty, with handsome eyes, though they had a curious habit of seeming to look a long way off. As if [...] they could see nothing nearer than Africa!"*⁴³

Dickens's London was full of people who could not see the poor all around them but who fancied themselves global philanthropists. Reading about Mrs. Jellyby would have been like looking in the mirror. Dickens shows us how a city's artists can be urban prophets and critique the injustices of the city.

Artist-prophets also paint pictures of healed cities. They don't just expose problems; they awaken hope. For example, artists in New York City noticed that many storefront properties were boarded up during the recession because no small businesses were renting them. They talked to developers and began turning these storefronts into art galleries and featuring the work of local artists in these once abandoned spaces. On the other side of the world, artists got to work after Mozambique's 17-year civil war ended. A community of artists chopped up AK-47 rifles, pistols, and rocket propelled grenade launchers and created a sculpture called the Tree of Life, a symbol of reconciliation after conflict.

Alex Haley's novel *Roots* told the story of American slavery in a way no one had told it before. Haley spent

the last 16 years of his life in East Tennessee. The city of Knoxville commissioned this 13-foot bronze statue of Alex Haley and unveiled it during Black History Month in 1998. The author sits by a stream with his novel in his hands, looking at the Great Smoky Mountains. The sculpture celebrates an artist from our city who was a champion of social justice and reminds us of a dark chapter in our nation's history that we must never forget.

Art creates joy in the city.

A third way artists bless the city is by creating joy in the city. In Isaiah's vision, joy is one characteristic of a city experiencing God's shalom. If joy fills the heavenly city, then celebrations and delight should also mark earthly cities, enjoying God's shalom. Artists often lead these celebrations.

James Trimble, lead singer of The Dirty Guv'nahs, observes that "music brings people together and creates commonality. Attending a live concert is one of the very few opportunities in life where a person gets to step outside of his or her problems for ninety minutes and instead be overwhelmed by joy, inspiration, and hopefully truth." He goes on to say that joy points to Christ: "We hope our concerts leave people feeling joyful and maybe, just maybe, we get them thinking about the purpose of their lives a little bit more. We aren't trying to convert or preach to people, but we are trying to give them an excellent experience and indirectly show them a little bit of the freedom Christ offers."⁴⁴

Art creates joy in the city in several ways. Art brings people together in the city. On a recent Friday evening, for example, Sandi and I went to an art exhibit at The SHAREhouse in Park Ridge. People from all over the neighborhood and the city came out to appreciate excellent photography, sip wine, and eat fancy cheese. Social magic happens when the people of a city gather to watch a play or listen to a concert. Art creates community, and it helps strangers become friends.

Art also helps us celebrate the city where we live. David Taylor explains how the arts help us embrace our city, even if we don't want to:



Some of us live in towns that feel strange to us [...] It's easy to resent God for putting us here. But artists come along and perform an invaluable service [...] [They] help us see that, in fact, God is happily at work here, quietly making grace happen in unexpected ways, gently rebuking our stubborn refusal to see that salvation and sanctification are occurring in this place—this street, this humidity, this church, this grocery store, these people [...] Artists [...] offer us a great gift. Their gift is to help us to see our place of residence as lovingly as God does.⁴⁵

Art, at least for a moment, helps us overcome our divisions and unite around a higher experience of beauty. On Christmas Eve, 1914, German troops shivered in their trenches a few hundred yards away from French

and Scottish soldiers. After long months of bloodshed, Kaiser Wilhelm had sent thousands of Christmas trees to the front to boost the troops morale. That night, when the trees were set up over the trenches, a German soldier with a lovely tenor voice began singing “Silent Night.” French and Scottish troops soon joined in. Eventually, the soldiers laid down their weapons, climbed out of the trenches, and met their enemy in the middle of no man’s land. They exchanged gifts and even played a game of soccer. Perhaps this is what Leo Tolstoy meant when he wrote, “Art should cause violence to be set aside.”⁴⁶

When the people of a city weep together as the curtain closes on a moving play, or sing an old Dylan song together on New Year’s Eve, we are, for at least a moment, no longer Republicans and Democrats, old or young,

When the people of a city weep together as the curtain closes on a moving play, or sing an old Dylan song together on New Year’s Eve, we are, for at least a moment, no longer Republicans and Democrats, old or young, South Knoxvilleians or West Knoxvilleians. We are one. Art brings this unity.

South Knoxvillians or West Knoxvillians. We are one.
Art brings this unity.

This video provides an illustration of how art can bring joy to the city:

<http://youtu.be/GBaHPND2QJg>

Caring for Van Gogh

Many artists do not feel supported by their church. Vincent van Gogh may be the unofficial patron saint of artists whose gifts were ignored or abused by the church. Van Gogh had a conversion experience around 1875 when he was working as an art dealer in the Netherlands. He became a missionary to coal miners and threw himself into the work. A generation later, coal miner families were still telling glowing stories about his ministry among the poorest of the poor. But the missionary agency fired him! About the same time, van Gogh became estranged from his uncle and father, two Dutch clergy who he felt had rejected him. Van Gogh left the church in 1880 and began to make his way in the world as an artist. His later artwork reflected his alienation from the church. For example, the church in *Starry Night* is the only building that does not reflect the brilliance of the stars above. It is completely dark.

What can the church do to support the van Goghs in her midst? We can become patrons of our artists. We can attend their shows and readings. We can buy their pictures

and sculptures and books. We can give them a spare room for a studio.

We can give our artists the freedom to create outside the traditional lines of Christian art. A book on art, which I was assigned to read in seminary, argued that Christians should produce “art depicting biblical stories or subjects related to the Christian faith.” The author reasoned that “by removing Christ, or Mary, or other Christian themes from the picture itself [...] it is as if Christ himself were placed outside the world.”⁴⁷

But this definition of “Christian art” limits the artist unnecessarily. The editor of the arts journal *Image*, Gregory Wolfe, has this to say about the true purpose of art:



*Too many efforts to relate religion and the arts have stumbled because they attempt to channel the imagination into pious patterns. At the root of this failure is an underlying fear of the imagination itself [...] Believers who fear the imagination prefer art that does not stray too far from the church porch [...] But art at its highest pitch tries to tell us things we don't know, or have forgotten, and that can be unsettling.*⁴⁸

We need to give our artists the freedom to follow their imaginations wherever the Spirit takes them.

Artists often feel that their unique way of perceiving the world inevitably places them on the margins of community, but we need to extend hospitality to them. When they pull away, we need to go after them. We need to learn their language, as best we can, and affirm their gifts and efforts. We need to celebrate them, as much as we celebrate social workers, missionaries, and preachers. We can serve artists by connecting them with other artists in the body. I'd love to see an artist community at All Souls where older artists can encourage younger artists.

After all, many artists need spiritual healing. In his autobiographical novel, *My Name is Asher Lev*, Chaim Potok painfully depicts the wounding a gifted artist can experience when the faith community he grows up in does not value his gift of expression. Asher shows his genius as a child, but his family are members of a strict Jewish sect. They believe that a life pursuing art is at best a waste of time and at worst a road to hell. A neighbor tells him: "Go wash your hands. You are driving us all crazy with your pictures and your stubbornness. What kind of Jewish boy behaves this way to a mother and father? You ought to be ashamed of yourself." But Asher cannot stop pursuing his gift and becomes a famous painter. His rabbi eventually tells him that he has become such a shame to his community that he must leave the city. Like van Gogh, Asher Lev is exiled from a faith community that cannot accept his gift.

How many Asher Levs have left our churches for similar reasons? Wounds like these stifle the creativity of the artist, making them suspicious of their own gift. When artists experience rejection like this, they can become overly critical of their own work and paralyzed by self-doubt. We must pray for their healing and for their freedom to fully pursue their calling. When artists experience healing, they bless the city with beautiful work that nourishes worship, exposes injustice, and creates joy.

CHAPTER SIX:

Hospitality

*Joyce Vincent, a radiant beauty of West Indies descent, moved into one of London's busiest neighborhoods to pursue a singing career. Reviewers compared the gifted young singer to Whitney Houston, but she died tragically in late 2003 at the age of 38. Even more tragically, three years passed before her body was discovered seated on a sofa in front of a television that had never been turned off. She was surrounded by Christmas presents. A brief newspaper article on the strange circumstances surrounding Ms. Vincent's death led a filmmaker to produce a documentary about her called "Dreams of a Life." A reviewer in the *New York Times* says the film seeks to answer the question: "How is it possible for the death of someone remembered as an effervescent, talented life of the party to go unnoticed for so long?" The reviewer concludes that the film has no answer.⁴⁹*

Life in the city can be lonely. Life anywhere, for that matter, can be lonely, as the writer Henri Nouwen observes:



The contemporary society in which we find ourselves makes us acutely aware of our loneliness [...] Loneliness is one of the most universal sources of human suffering today [...] The roots of loneliness are very deep [...] They find their food in the suspicion that there is no one who cares and offers love without conditions, and no place where we can be vulnerable without being used.⁵⁰

One way the church seeks the peace of the city is by welcoming lonely people into the family of God. The bible calls this practice hospitality. What does it mean to truly practice hospitality? Nouwen remarks, “At first the word ‘hospitality’ might evoke the image of soft sweet kindness, tea parties, bland conversations and a general atmosphere of coziness [...] The concept of hospitality has lost much of its power [in our culture].” Then he adds, “If there is any concept worth restoring to its original depth and evocative potential, it is the concept of hospitality.”⁵¹ Before we consider ways we can practice hospitality in the city, let’s take a moment and try to recover the original meaning of the idea.

The Origin of Loneliness

The Book of Genesis attributes loneliness to the fall. Sin shattered shalom and cut us off from God and from one

another, leading to violence. When Cain is punished for murdering his brother, he cries out, “You have driven me away... I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth” (ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION GEN. 4:13-14). Cain epitomizes the alienated human being, sentenced to wander a dangerous planet alone.

Welcoming the Stranger

God moves his people to practice hospitality towards the wanderers of the world. When three guests appear at Abraham’s tent in the intense desert heat, Abraham kneels before them and washes their feet. He and Sarah prepare a great feast for the men and encourage them to stay and rest (GEN. 18:1-8). Abraham gradually realizes that his guests are angels. They warn him about the coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and bless the elderly couple with the promise of a child in their old age.

This story illustrates several key themes about hospitality that appear frequently in the rest of the Bible. When we welcome the stranger, we are encountering God.

When we extend kindness to a guest, we are putting ourselves into a position where we can hear a word of promise and receive blessing from God.

Within a few generations, Abraham’s descendants will themselves be strangers in Egypt. The Book of Exodus tells the story of God’s hospitality to Israel. God reaches out to Israel by sending them Moses, rescues them from Egypt, and forms them into a people in the desert. The nation of Israel knows what it means to be an outsider

and receive grace. Therefore, she is to extend grace to those living on the margins of her community. Drawing upon Israel's own experience of divine hospitality, God commands: "When a stranger sojourns with you in your land...you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God" (LEV. 9:33-34. SEE ALSO DEUT. 10:16-18). As always in scripture, the experience of grace prompts the giving of grace, and this is the heart of hospitality.

So important was hospitality in Israel that we find a number of Old Testament stories where the practice is rewarded. Abigail wins herself a husband because of her generous hospitality to David (1 SAM. 25:14-35, 39-42). The widow of Zarahub, who gave Elijah her last food, is rewarded with enough food to sustain her until the famine was over (1 KINGS 17:8-16). The Shunammite woman who provided a cozy guest room for Elisha is rewarded with a son (2 KINGS 4:1-17).

Other stories describe God's punishment on those who fail to practice hospitality. The Ammonites and the Moabites failed to give bread and water to Israel when they left Egypt and were excluded from the assembly (DEUT. 23:3-4). After denying David's request for food for his troops, a sheep rancher named Nabal drops dead from a heart attack (1 SAM. 25:1-13; 36-38).

Jesus and the Open Table

Jesus extends the tradition of hospitality by making the dinner table the central symbol of the kingdom of God.

*The kingdom of God is a kingdom hospitable
to everyone, regardless of class
and social standing.*

In the culture of the ancient Near East, sharing a meal was a sacred act. When you invited a person to eat with you, you were welcoming him into the protection of your home and heart. Strict social boundaries dictated who was to be on the guest list. You typically invited guests who were in your same social class and were in a position to return the favor. Jesus rewrites the guest list. The kingdom of God is a kingdom hospitable to everyone, regardless of class and social standing.

Jesus describes salvation as a huge dinner party to which anyone can come. When the disciples don't understand how God can welcome a Roman soldier into his family, Jesus explains: "I tell you, many will come from the east and the west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (MATT. 8:11). He tells the young man who invites him to dinner, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers, or your relatives or neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you" (LUKE 14:12-14). His enemies describe his

ministry in a similar manner, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (LUKE 15:2).

Sometimes Jesus himself is the host of a great meal. He feeds 5,000 on a Galilean hillside, and then explains that he himself is the bread of life (JOHN 6-7). On the night before his death, we find our Lord yet again at the dinner table, hosting the Passover meal with his disciples (MATT. 26:26-29; MARK 14:22-25; LUKE 22:19-20).

The novelist Frederick Buechner likely had these verses in mind when he describes a great dinner party in his novel *Love Feast*. Leo Bebb, a traveling evangelist, arranges a spur-of-the-moment Thanksgiving dinner at the Princeton home of his wealthy patroness, Gertrude Conover. The guest list includes a nun, a secretary, several students, and a part-time prostitute. After the guests have eaten their fill, Reverend Bebb pushes his chair back and brings a word. The novel’s narrator recalls the following fragments of the preacher’s suppertime sermon:



He said, “The kingdom of heaven is like a great feast. That’s the way of it. The Kingdom of Heaven is a love feast where nobody’s a stranger. Like right here. There’s strangers everywhere you can think of. There’s strangers was born out of the same womb. There’s strangers was raised together in the same town and worked side by side all their life through. There’s strangers that got married and been climbing in and out of the same four-poster together for thirty-five or forty years, and they’re strangers still. And Jesus,

it's like most of the time he's a stranger too. Even when he's as near as the end of your nose, people make like he is nowhere around.... But here in this place there's no strangers and Jesus, he isn't a stranger either. The Kingdom of heaven is like this.

We all got secrets. I got them same as everybody else—things we feel bad about and wish hadn't ever happened. Hurtful things. We're all scared and lonesome, but most of the time we keep it hid. It's like every one of us has lost his way so bad we don't even know which way is home any more only we are ashamed to ask. You know what would happen if we would own up we're lost and ask? Why, what would happen is that we'd find home in each other. We'd find out home is Jesus loves us lost or found or any which way.⁵²

This is the kingdom of God as Jesus describes it: a home where every kind of stranger is welcome.

Hospitality and the Lonely City

Following the example of Jesus, early Christians practiced hospitality towards their neighbors in the city. City life was extremely difficult in a typical first-century Greco-Roman city. Sociologist Rodney Stark estimates that Antioch was six times more crowded than Chicago. City dwellers lived in wooden tenement apartments that were always at risk of burning down. Soot coated everything. City dwellers disposed of waste by emptying their chamber pot out onto the street. Roughly half of the children died before their first birthdays, and most of the children who did live lost a parent before they were twenty. Robbers roamed the streets. Racial tensions

often boiled over when thousands of immigrants came to the cities seeking work. These dangers only intensified at night: “Night fell over the city like the shadow of a great danger, diffused, sinister, menacing. Everyone fled to his home, shut himself in, and barricaded the entrance. The shops fell silent; safety chains were drawn behind the leaves of the doors.” Stark adds, “If the rich had to sally forth, they were accompanied by slaves who carried torches to light and protect them on their way [...] Juvenal sighs that to go out to supper without having made your will was [...] careless.”⁵³

The New Testament writers instruct these urban Christians to witness to their neighbors through loving hospitality. The Greek word for stranger is “*xenos*,” and the Greek word for hospitality is “*philoxenia*,” which means “loving strangers.” The early Christians sought the peace of their city by loving and welcoming into their fellowship their neighbors who were strangers to them.

Paul exhorts the believers living in the midst of the great city of Rome to “seek to show hospitality” (ROM. 13:2). The author of the letter to the Hebrews encourages urban Christians suffering persecution to not forget the example of Abraham: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (HEB. 13:2). Peter reminds his readers, scattered across the cities of the empire, to not forget to practice hospitality among themselves: “Show hospitality to one another without grumbling” (1 PET. 4:9). Paul reminds Timothy, laboring in the thriving metropolis of

Ephesus, that his churches should look for leaders who are hospitable (1 TIM. 3:2). While making a record of his visions on the island of Patmos and sending them off to churches struggling to find a foothold in seven cities in Asia Minor, John reminds his readers that the kingdom of God is like a great marriage supper to which everyone is invited (REV. 19:7-9, 22:17).

Rethinking hospitality

Hospitality entails much more than punch and cookies after church. Hospitality is welcoming and loving the stranger—the other, the foreigner, the marginalized, the immigrant, and the neighbor you don't know—with the same gracious love God showed you. Biblical hospitality is always infused with the mysterious anticipation that God himself is present in the guest you entertain. Biblical hospitality provides a picture of the gospel of salvation itself: God's gracious invitation to everyone to come and fellowship with him. Reflecting on the biblical teachings about hospitality, Henri Nouwen explores what practicing hospitality might look like in our lonely cities:



Hospitality [...] means primarily the creation of a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy. Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place...a friendly emptiness where strangers can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.

Nouwen concludes, “Hospitality is not a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host, but the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own.”⁵⁴

Come and See

Hospitality became the primary way that the gospel spread in the early Church. Christians welcomed their neighbors into a new community called the church. Over time, they would engage in conversations about Jesus and the new way of life that he offered. Gently, patiently, over the course of many months, they would explain the gospel. When the stranger, who had now become a friend, believed, he or she was baptized into the family of God.

During a period in the Middle Ages when the church in Europe had stagnated, thousands were coming to faith in Ireland through the ministry of Celtic monasteries. These monasteries invited their neighbors to be their guests.

Jesus models this approach to witnessing when he calls his first disciples. Prompted by John the Baptist, Andrew and John were following Jesus. Jesus asked them, “What do you want?” They asked him where he lived. Jesus replied, “Come and see” (JOHN 1:37-39). Come and see. This is hospitality evangelism. We say to our neighbor, “Come, join us. Become a part of our family. Let us wel-

come you, love you, and introduce you to the one who welcomed and loved us first.”

The Celtic monasteries practiced Come-and-See evangelism very effectively. During a period in the Middle Ages when the Church in Europe had stagnated, thousands were coming to faith in Ireland through the ministry of Celtic monasteries. These monasteries invited their neighbors to be their guests. They invited anyone who wanted to come: seekers, refugees, runaway slaves, pilgrims, or even whole families.

When you arrived at one of these Irish monasteries, a porter would meet you at the entrance. The porter’s chief job was to welcome guests and introduce them to the rest of the community. The abbot or abbess would inquire about what had prompted your visit, beginning the ministry of conversation. He or she would then read a scripture for you, offer a prayer, and extend the kiss of peace. The abbot would then wash your feet and take you to a guesthouse where another brother prepared a bed for you. You would be seated at the abbot’s table at meals, or if you arrived during a season of fasting, the abbot broke his fast for you because the abbot had no higher priority than honoring guests. If you chose to stay, you would be given an *anam cara*, or soul friend, a small group, and a place for prayer and solitude. You also would be invited to worship with the community. Several brothers would share the ministry of conversation with you every day and pray with you. Over time, you would either conclude that this way of life is not for you, or, as

often happened, you would find yourself believing what these Christians believed, and be baptized.⁵⁵

We practice come-and-see evangelism at All Souls. As the Irish proverb has it, “It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.”⁵⁶ We invite our neighbors into the shelter of our life together under God. We invite them

to come and see another way for broken people to make their way in a lonely world. We invite them to taste and see that the Lord is good. And as the months go by, as we live



the rhythm of the Christian year, as we read the scriptures and study them, as we worship and break bread together, as we give birth to our babies, marry our children, and bury our dead, we give witness to the gospel.

Our welcome is our witness. As John Vanier wisely wrote, “Welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to live with us is a sign that we are not afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to

share [...] A community which refuses to welcome— whether through fear, weariness, insecurity, a desire to cling to comfort, or just because it is fed up with visitors, is dying spiritually.”⁵⁷

Hospitality as a Response to Grace

As we think about practicing hospitality towards our neighbors in the city, keep this in mind: authentic hospitality is a response to grace. We love the stranger because God loved us as strangers. Practicing hospitality is a gentle, natural overflow of his love towards another. If our efforts at practicing hospitality are filled with anxiety, we had better rethink what it means for us to be hospitable. If having people over to your house totally stresses you out, if you are always worried about how clean your house is and feel pressure to make everything perfect, if you are always apologizing about the dog hair and the chipped cups and the undercooked steak, then you need to rethink what you are doing. If having others into your home creates too much anxiety, then you may need to examine your heart. Perhaps you don't get grace. Perhaps you are trying to perform. Hospitality anxiety might be telling you that having people over is not the best way for you to practice hospitality.

Thinking More Broadly About Hospitality

Let's revisit Henri Nouwen's definition of hospitality as providing “a free space where the stranger can enter and become a friend instead of an enemy [...] where strangers

can enter and discover themselves as created free; free to sing their own songs, speak their own languages, dance their own dances; free also to leave and follow their own vocations.” What does it mean for you to create a free space for someone? What does it mean for you to create a safe place where a stranger can enter and find her own song? I bet you are doing this already but aren’t aware of it. Follow the flow of energy in your life. Can you discern any places in your life where you love to extend God’s welcome to someone you don’t know?

You might be already practicing hospitality towards the servers at your favorite restaurant. You learn their names and even their stories. You give them generous tips and warm smiles. You might also practice hospitality towards your students by listening to them, encouraging them, and believing in them. You might practice hospitality towards your clients. Over the years they’ve become your friends. You meet their business needs but make sure you create enough space to meet their personal needs as well. Your conversations take far longer than the deal requires because you are the one person in their world who really listens to them. You might practice hospitality with your leadership. You lead a small group or a company or serve on boards and craft a welcoming culture that replaces fear of the stranger with love for the stranger. Remember, having people into your home is only one way to practice hospitality. Be creative!

Hospitality and Consensual Orthodoxy

At All Souls we practice consensual orthodoxy as an expression of hospitality. We invite our neighbors to come and see Jesus. Rather than duke it out over various doctrinal questions, as important as these may be, we try to focus our teaching and preaching on Jesus and the classic expression of who he was and what he did that is found in the church's most ancient creeds. Consensual orthodoxy refers to what all Christians at all times in all places have always believed. The early church called together ecumenical councils and hammered out mere Christianity, the essence or core of the faith in which every Christian believes. We want our church members to believe this, too. We are a Christian community, and when you hang out with us, we will encourage you to believe in Jesus Christ. Believing in Jesus Christ involves both a personal surrender to the Lord of the gospel and a mental assent to the truths of the gospel, distilled in the Apostles Creed.

We don't spend a lot of time taking positions on important but secondary issues that are not found in the Creeds, such as divorce and remarriage, baptism, and the nature of the sacraments; or a Christian approach to the health care plan or immigration reform. Though we care deeply about these issues, we recognize that sincere Christians disagree on the solutions. We debate vigorously with each other, but the church as a whole doesn't take a position because we want to be welcoming to our guests.

Many spiritual seekers reject the Church's teaching on a particular social issue, or on the nature of the bible, or

on the relationship of science to scripture, and *think* they have rejected Christ. We don't want to grow a doctrinal corn maze that a seeker must navigate before finding the prize of Christ at the end.

Many spiritual seekers reject the Church's teaching on a particular social issue, or on the nature of the bible, or on the relationship of science to scripture, and think they have rejected Christ. We don't want to grow a doctrinal corn maze that a seeker must navigate before finding the prize of Christ at the end.

Practicing Hospitality Together

Biblical hospitality is more communal than individual. We Westerners tend to read all biblical commands through the lens of our individuality; our first impulse is to ask, "What should I do about this?" This is often our approach to hospitality as well. Sometimes Christians do practice hospitality by themselves. The story of the Good Samaritan is evidence of this, yet the vast majority of texts on hospitality in the bible are written to communities. Israel is to welcome the stranger as a community. The Roman churches to whom Paul wrote were to be hospitable as communities.

Many Christians are remarkably hospitable as individuals. Numerous examples come to mind. But what does it mean to become more hospitable as a community? One of the reasons why All Souls moved to 4 Market Square was to be a welcoming presence in the heart of the city. How can we do this better? How can we reach out to the Joyce Vincents in our city?

It's hard to imagine how a vibrant young lady could lie dead in her apartment, undiscovered, for three years. Cities can be lonely places, and one of the ways that we can bless them is through the practice of hospitality.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Prayer

Three times in my life I have heard God speak to me in an almost audible voice. One of those times took place in December of 2005 when I was on retreat at The Abby of Gethsemani in rural Kentucky. I was hiking on a muddy trail, winding through the forest across the road from the monastery, and praying about All Souls' calling to seek the peace of our city. I sensed God saying, "Create a place like this monastery in the heart of your city."

I've shared this word with our leaders many times over the years, and together, we have tried to discern what it means. All Souls is obviously not a literal monastery. We don't take vows, we are not all celibate, and we don't all live together. In what sense is our church like an urban monastery? Monasteries are Christian communities who bless the world through their prayers, and in a similar way, All Souls seeks to bless the city through prayer.

God commends the practice of prayer as a way of making shalom in Jeremiah's letter to the exiles. "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile," the Lord commands. "Pray to the LORD for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper" (JER. 29:7). God commands us to pray to the Lord for the peace and prosperity of our city.

A Call For Fervent Intercession For The City

The Hebrew word used here for prayer is *palal*. The first time this word appears in the Bible is in Genesis 20:7. God told King Abimelech in a dream to return Abraham's wife to him. Then God explained "For he is a prophet, [...] he will *pray* for you and you shall live." Here prayer offered by a child of God brings life to a pagan king. Jeremiah uses the word in a similar way: The people of God are to pray for their neighbors in the city so they might enjoy true life.

The root of *palal* literally means, "to fall down." The same Hebrew word is used in Isaiah 45:14, in which the Sabeans fell down and pled with Cyrus. The word *palal* commonly refers to interceding on behalf of someone else. This word shows up, for example, when Moses prays for the people's deliverance from fiery serpents. He interceded for them; he pled with God on their behalf. In a similar way, Jeremiah urged the people to intercede for their city, to fall down and plead with God on its behalf.

Praying For Shalom

For what are we to pray? God commands us to pray for the peace and prosperity of the city. As we've seen, the phrase "peace and prosperity" is a translation of the Hebrew word, *shalom*. *Shalom* connotes "safety, soundness, welfare, health, prosperity, peace, quiet, tranquility, contentment [...]friendship".⁵⁸ God wants us to pray that our city experiences these things.

Is that really true? What will happen?

Studying God's command to pray for shalom rearranged my prayer life. I was used to praying for, well, more "spiritual" things, such as repentance and revival. It never occurred to me to pray for a city's safety, health, or economic vitality.

Studying God's command to pray for *shalom* rearranged my prayer life. I was used to praying for, well, more "spiritual" things, such as repentance and revival. It never occurred to me to pray for a

city's safety, health, or economic vitality. But the Hebrew vision of *shalom* is holistic. In the Hebrew worldview, God is saving, healing, and blessing all of life and bringing it under his loving rule. To pray for *shalom* is to pray for souls, and streets, and healthcare clinics, and schools. "In the Bible, shalom means universal flourishing, whole-

ness, and delight,” Cornelius Plantinga reminds us. Shalom is “a rich state of affairs in which natural needs are satisfied and natural gifts fruitfully employed, a state of affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom He delights. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be.”⁵⁹

Things were once as they ought to be.

Adam and Eve enjoyed shalom in the Garden. But the entrance of sin into God’s good world led to the shattering of *shalom*. Sin, to use Plantinga’s apt phrase, is the “vandalism of shalom.”⁶⁰ Our cities have experienced the vandalism of shalom. They are not what they ought to be, and sometimes the vandalism is visible. We see graffiti sprayed on the new playground bench. We see where somebody shattered a factory window. More often the vandalism cannot be





seen. We rarely lay eyes on the shivering widow with a \$700 winter heating bill who wonders whether she should use her limited funds to pay for medicine or heat. We rarely hear the depressed mother admit that she hasn't felt joy in three years.

They have experienced evil, the spoiling of shalom, and so we must pray for them. We must fall down and plead with God for every member of our city who is not flourishing. We must call for God's life to flow into every place in our city where God's good order is wrecked. We must pray for the *shalom* of our city.

Prayer and the Powers

How does prayer restore the *shalom* of the city? For starters, prayer engages the powers that oppose the peace of

the city. Consider the example of Daniel. A gifted young man named Daniel lived among the Jewish exiles living in Babylon. He rose to a prominent position in the administration of his city. Like most other godly Jews, Daniel prayed three times a day (DAN. 6:10). One day, while Daniel was praying, an angel came to him and explained that opposing spiritual powers, assigned to geographic territories, were hindering his prayers (DAN. 10:12-14). The apostle Paul referred to similar spiritual powers in his letters to urban churches, calling them principalities and powers. Christ will ultimately defeat the powers, he assured them, yet they still oppose God's work in the world. He reminded the Christians living in exile in the city of Ephesus that they "do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places." Given the reality of the powers, Christians must put on the armor of God, and make sure that they are "praying at all times in the Spirit" (EPH. 6:12,18).

For many centuries, most believers accepted the Bible's teaching that spiritual powers resist God's purposes in our cities. After the Enlightenment, however, many Bible scholars concluded that the Bible was simply recording the superstitions of a pre-modern people. That viewpoint changed with the Holocaust. European scholars witnessed an entire nation become, in a sense, demon-possessed. They revisited Paul's teachings on the powers with fresh perspective and concluded that he had described a reality they could not deny, as hard as that real-

ity may be to understand. More went on in Berlin than met the eye. Sociologist Tony Campolo describes the relationship of these powers to the city in a paragraph worth quoting at length:



There is a real, though invisible, demonic presence in urban America that transcends the empirical realities studied by sociologists. When social scientists gather data on such things as crime, homelessness, urban blight, disintegrating families, teenage prostitutes, growing joblessness, racial conflict, and the alienated elderly, they are at a loss to explain why such things are increasingly evident[...]. On a subliminal level, these social scientists know that something more is unfolding in the city than that which is objectively available to their scientific instruments of investigation[...]. Can there be any doubt that something has gone haywire in the societal systems of the city? Schools created to enhance the lives of boys and girls are, in many cities, marked by violence and even the teaching of anti-God values[...]. Governmental structures purposed by God to hold back evildoers (ROM. 13:1-3) are too often corrupted into agencies that serve the selfish designs of special interest groups[...]. Economic institutions, created to provide employment and give workers the opportunity to produce things that people need, end up doing neither, caring only that production maximizes profits[...]. Not even the religious establishment is free from the possibility of demonic control.”⁶¹

Wise saints know this to be true. A friend of mine who worked in youth ministry for many years told me of a time when his church was getting excited about sending

youth into a troubled city in Mexico on a mission trip. An elderly prayer-warrior came to him and warned, “Don’t think you can just waltz into that city. If you aren’t prayed up, you’re going to get hurt.” As Walter Wink reminds us in his book, *The Powers that Be*, “The act of praying is itself one of the indispensable means by which we engage The Powers. It is in fact that engagement at its most fundamental level, where their secret spell over us is broken and we are reestablished in a bit more of the freedom that is our birthright and potential.”⁶²

Prayer And Action

Prayer also sustains us as we serve the city. Put another way, our contemplation informs and nourishes our action. Christians typically favor either prayer or action. Contemplatives love prayer and stress the importance of knowing God personally. They remind us of the importance of nurturing an intimate relationship with Him. Contemplatives warn of the dangers of ministering without an abiding relationship with Jesus Christ.

*At All Souls we are learning that
contemplation nourishes action.*

Activists, on the other hand, are all about doing. Activists stress the importance of making faith concrete through service and compassion. They remind us that faith without works is dead and warn of the dangers of a self-centered, inward-looking faith.

At All Souls we are learning that contemplation nourishes action. Prayer nourishes ministry. Intimacy with Christ generates service for Christ. We abide in Christ *so that* we bear much fruit. We are filled with the Spirit *in order to* bear the fruits of the Spirit. Daniel prays three times a day *to prepare him* to speak truth to power. Nehemiah prays all night *to discern a vision* for restoring the walls of Jerusalem. Jesus strategically withdraws from the crowds and communes with his father *so he can return* to the crowds and minister to them. Here is the bottom line: we cannot *sustain* our work in the world unless *we are sustained by* our relationship with God. Contemplation nourishes action. When we cultivate an intimate relationship with Jesus in prayer, we begin to feel what he feels for our city, we find our place in the city, and we find the strength to persevere in the works to which he calls us.

Caroline, a young woman in our congregation, wrote me an email that illustrates how prayer nourishes ministry in the city:



When I first moved to Knoxville I hated it [...] Having moved from Nashville, the city seemed small, vacant, honestly, kinda grungy.

After spending a good amount of my freshman year griping about this place and going other places every possible weekend, I started a good habit. One night a week, I went to a hill behind my dorm and prayed....

One particular night, I took a pen and paper with me and began to draw a picture of a house held by hands. The house was surrounded by darkness but inside of the house a tree was starting to grow. After I finished drawing I understood that the picture represented Knoxville. What I had seen as darkness this whole time was actually producing life. That night, something changed. All of a sudden I was interested in this weird little place. I began to get to know the city that I now claim and call home. I can't explain the transition that happened in me internally. I never knew or loved Nashville like I do Knoxville. There is something special for me here. It all feels very purposeful.

Prayer gave Caroline a heart for the city. She continued to pray on that hill behind her dorm. Eventually God revealed her role in the city as well.

Shalom-making is hard work. After several years ministering in the city, I began to struggle with discouragement and depression. Susanne, a wise friend and spiritual guide, challenged me. “Are you keeping a Sabbath?” she asked. I replied that I could not at this time in my life. I had too many responsibilities. Susanne kept pressing me about keeping Sabbath. Articles on Sabbath-keeping popped up in my inbox. I found books on Sabbath-keeping, leaning against my office door. During our church’s seventh year, the sabbatical year according to scripture, I finally gave in and began practicing Sabbath. My first months were pitiful. I was like an addict coming off of my drug of choice—being productive. I kept checking my email. I snuck in phone calls. I took notes for my next sermon series. Eventually, I learned to receive the

Prayer fuels our work in the city.

gift of one day where I did nothing but rest, pray, and feed my body and soul. I now enjoy more peace in my work in the city, which is important, because you can't give what you don't have. You can't seek and make peace when you yourself are not at peace.

Prayer fuels our work in the city. Prayer gives us a heart for our city. Prayer helps us discern our role in the city. Prayer sustains our ministry in the city. Contemplation nourishes action. We do well to heed Walter Wink's warning: "Unprotected by prayer, our social activism runs the danger of becoming self-justifying good works. As our inner resources atrophy, the wells of love run dry, and we are slowly changed into the likeness of the beast."⁶³

Prayer—don't leave home without it.

Prayer And Presence

In 1746 the American pastor and theologian Jonathan Edwards wrote a little book with a long title, *An Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer for the Revival of Religion and to the Advancement of Christ's Kingdom on Earth*. The book is a sermon on a prophecy found in Zechariah,

which speaks into what the citizens of a city say to one another: “Let us go at once to entreat the favor of the LORD and to seek the LORD of hosts; I myself am going” (ZECH. 8:21). Interpreting this prophecy, Edwards believed that God’s people, united in extraordinary prayer, should invite God’s presence into a city or region. Presence is a third way that prayer blesses a city.

Edwards wrote that in these kinds of extraordinary prayer meetings, “God himself is the great good desired and sought after.... The blessings pursued are God’s gracious presence, the blessed manifestations of him, union and intercourse with him; or, in short, God’s manifestations and communication of himself by the Holy Spirit.” These meetings build the kingdom: “There shall be given much of a spirit of prayer to God’s people [...] disposing them to come into an express agreement, unitedly to pray to God in an extraordinary manner, that he would appear for the help of his church, and in mercy to mankind, pour out his spirit, revive his work, and advance his spiritual kingdom in the world.”⁶⁴ Edwards’s theology of prayer and presence became foundational to the Great Awakening, which powerfully demonstrated that prayer truly does invite God’s presence into a region and into a city.

Prayer also invites God’s presence into the church. He is omnipresent; as the psalmist says, there is nowhere we can run from his presence. God’s gracious presence is everywhere, but God’s *manifest* presence is something

different. Sometimes God manifests his power, his love, his holiness, his glory, and his peace in a more tangible way. The Puritans described God's manifest presence as being "thick."

Moses was thinking of God's manifest presence when he prays: "If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here.¹⁶ How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?" (NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION EXOD. 33:15-16). God, in response to Moses' prayer, became present with Israel again.

This is not just an old covenant event. Prayer invokes the presence of God upon the people of God on the day of Pentecost as well (ACTS 23:1-14). And Paul tells the believers gathered in Ephesus, "Be filled with the Spirit" (EPH. 5:18). Prayer welcomes God's presence into the church.

One of the consequences of this, the prophets tell us, is that the people of the city will be drawn towards God's presence. For example, the prophet Isaiah envisions a day when "the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains...and all the nations shall flow to it" (ISA. 2:2).

A few months after All Souls moved into 4 Market Square, I experienced firsthand the attractive power of prayer. A man named Robert came into my office to talk.

*Robert sat down in my office chair and asked,
“Is this a monastery?”*

Our church had barely begun in the Square Room, but we had rented space for a chapel and many were praying for the city there. Robert had lived downtown for many years and was a devout atheist. When he made an appointment to see me, I wondered if he was planning to chew me out for being there. Robert sat down in my office chair and asked, “Is this a monastery?” I explained that the vision of 4 Market Square was, in fact, to create a kind of urban monastery in the heart of the city. I told him that we were praying for the city.

Robert then told me a story I will never forget. He had been reading a science fiction book one night in his downtown condo when he came across a passage, convincing him that God exists. Robert asked me if I could show him how to know God, and we began meeting weekly. I learned a lot about the city from Robert, and Robert learned a little bit about God from me. Robert became a Christian. A few months later, he died of a heart attack.

Robert was drawn to the presence of God, and I believe that one reason why he felt the presence of God in our building was because people were praying there.

History Belongs To The Intercessors

Prayer seeks the peace of the city by engaging the powers that oppose the city, nourishing ministry in the city, and inviting the presence of God into the city. “History belongs to the intercessors,” asserts Walter Wink. “Intercessory prayer is spiritual defiance of what is in the name of what God has promised [...] When we pray, we are not sending a letter to a celestial White House, where it is sorted among piles of others. We are engaged, rather, in an act of co-creation, in which one little sector of the universe rises up and becomes [...] a vibratory center of power that radiates the power of the universe.... [After all] faith is not a feeling or capacity we conjure up, but trusting that God can act decisively in the world.”⁶⁵

Big Pumpkins

A story passed down from the monastic tradition in Europe illustrates Wink’s point. Many years ago, a community of monks began a small monastery on a hill overlooking a French village. At first, the villagers were suspicious of the monks. But the monks kept mostly to themselves, devoting themselves to prayer. The years passed, and the villagers mostly forgot about the monastery on the hill. One day, a farmer came into market, unloaded his cart, and commented to

“I could swear that my pumpkins are bigger now than they used to be.”

his friend, “I could swear that my pumpkins are bigger now than they used to be.” His friend replied, “You know, I am almost certain that my cow gives more milk now than she used to.” The sheriff, who happened to be walking by, overheard the two farmers and added, “Now that you mention it, the jail has fewer inmates than ever before.” One by one, they all looked up the hill at the little monastery, and they understood why things had changed for the better in their village.



CHAPTER EIGHT: *Justice*

Austin was walking back to his truck parked on the Gay Street Bridge when a homeless man asked him if he had any money. Austin said no. The man shot back, “Your glasses cost more than my shoes,” and with a touch of sarcasm, “I’ll clean them for a dollar.” Austin spun around and replied, “Asking for money is one thing, but being rude is another thing entirely.” The man was shocked, and hum-

bled. “You’re right,” he said. “I’m sorry I acted like a jerk.” Austin asked the man to tell him his story. His name was Leon. While high on tranquilizers, his cousin had wrecked his car. Leon had been making \$14 an hour as a skilled mason, but lost his job because he had no way to get to work. Within weeks, he could not afford the rent on his apartment and ended up on the street. Leon then told Austin, “I remember driving down Broadway and seeing all the people out in front of KARM and thinking, ‘I’m so glad I’m not one of them.’ Now, I am.”

Why did Austin let go of his agenda for half an hour to listen to a homeless man tell his story? I think the reason is simple: Austin is a follower of Jesus. He knows that God has placed him in the city to seek its *shalom*. Sometimes that involves caring for a homeless man by listening to his story. The bible calls caring for the poor and vulnerable members of a community practicing justice, and practicing justice is one of the ways God’s people seek the peace of their city.

What Is Justice?

“Justice” is one of those big biblical words. It shows up everywhere in the bible. The word translated “justice” in the Old Testament is *mishpat*. It appears 422 times in the noun form alone! *Mishpat* is used two different ways. Sometimes the word refers to fair judgments. God is a God of justice because he judges equitably. The psalmist praises God this very reason: “The King in his might loves justice. You have established equity; you have executed justice and righteousness in Jacob” (Ps. 99:2-4).

The Anchor Bible Dictionary says that mishpat, used in this sense, refers to “the restoration of a situation or environment which promoted [...] shalom in a community.

“Clouds and thick darkness are all around him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne” (Ps. 97:2). God judges fairly because he *is* just: “The Lord [...] has established his throne for justice, and he judges the world with righteousness” (Ps. 9:7-8). Because God is just and judges fairly, Israel’s leaders are to judge fairly as well: “You shall not be partial in judgment. You shall hear the small and the great alike. You shall not be intimidated by anyone, for the judgment is God’s” (DEUT. 1:17). *Mishpat* thus refers to acts of judging characterized by fairness and equity.

In other texts, *mishpat* refers to restoring the world to the way God intended it to be. The *Anchor Bible Dictionary* says that *mishpat*, used in this sense, refers to “the restoration of a situation or environment which promoted [...] *shalom* in a community.”⁶⁶ New Testament scholar N.T. Wright defines justice as “the intention of God, expressed from Genesis to Revelation, to set the whole world right—a plan gloriously fulfilled in Jesus Christ, supremely in his resurrection [following his victory over the powers of evil and death on the cross], and now to be implemented in the world.”⁶⁷

Justice As Restoring Shalom

God created the world to enjoy his shalom, his good order. The rebellion of the first couple wrecked God's good order; sin shattered shalom. Life on earth was no longer what God had created it to be. God is now in the process of restoring order to his broken planet, of restoring shalom. He has invited us to join him, setting the world to rights. When we join God in restoring shalom to our neighborhood, we practice what the Hebrew writers called *mishpat*. When we work to put good order back in our community, we are practicing justice.

This is the kind of justice the prophet Amos refers to when he proclaims, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (AMOS 5:24). This is the kind of justice the prophet Micah refers to in his classic summary of authentic religion: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (MIC. 6:8). When we work for the restoration of shalom to our community, we are pursuing justice.

Justice and the Vulnerable

Old Testament scholar Norman Snaith has shown that the most striking characteristic of biblical justice is caring for the weak and vulnerable.⁶⁸ Doing justice in the city usually includes caring for its weaker members. Consider these passages:



“Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the immigrant, the fatherless, and the widow.” (DEUT. 27:19)

“Do justice...and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the immigrant, the fatherless or the widow...” (JER. 22:3)

“Because I delivered the poor who cried for help, and the fatherless who had none to help him [...] and I caused the widow’s heart to sing joy [...] my justice was like a robe and a turban.” (JOB 29:12-14)

Justice and Jesus

The only time we discussed justice in seminary was when we studied the Old Testament prophets. We never talked about justice in our courses on the Gospels, Epistles, or the ministry of the church. Is doing justice as important for the church as it was for Israel? What does the New Testament say about doing justice?

The best place to begin is with Jesus. Jesus understood himself to be fulfilling the prophecies that the Hebrew prophets made about the Messiah.

These prophets declared that when the Messiah came he would bring justice. Jesus quoted Isaiah more than any other prophet. Isaiah announced that when the Messiah comes, “a throne will be established in steadfast love, and on it will sit [...] one who judges and seeks justice” (ISA. 16:5). When the Messiah comes, “justice will dwell in the wilderness” (ISA. 32:16). In the day of the Messiah, a

child will be born to Israel, “and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end [...] [He will sit] on the throne of David and over his kingdom to [...] uphold it with justice” (ISA. 9:6-7).

In Isaiah 61, the prophet went so far as to describe a sermon about justice the Messiah will preach when he comes. When he comes, the Messiah will say: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor” (ISAIAH 61:1). Fast-forward about

Given the clear call to justice in our Lord’s inaugural sermon, we are not surprised to discover that Jesus spent a great deal of time caring for the weaker members of the cities that he visited in Israel.

seven hundred years to when Jesus began his public ministry. One Sabbath day, he walked into the small synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. At the moment when guest rabbis were invited to teach on Torah, Jesus rose, opened the scroll, and read Isaiah 61.

He rolled the scroll back up, sat down, and said something amazing: “Today, this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” (LUKE 4:16-21). “I am Messiah,” he was saying. “I have come to restore shalom to the earth. I have come to return the world to God’s good order. I have come to bring about God’s justice.”

Given the clear call to justice in our Lord's inaugural sermon, we are not surprised to discover that Jesus spent a great deal of time caring for the weaker members of the cities that he visited in Israel. No other Jewish leader would have chosen to eat, drink, laugh, and cry with the poor, with women, and with outcasts, but Jesus did (MATT. 9:13). He taught his disciples to do the same. Most rabbis never spoke with women, but Jesus addressed them in public and invited them to travel with his party. His own mother, who had been a poor teenager while pregnant with him, prophesied that her son would "fill the poor" (LUKE 1:53). Lepers were so despised in Jesus' day that they had to move to the other side of



the street and cry out, “Unclean!” whenever a holy man walked by. Jesus challenged social norms by touching and healing them (MARK 1:41; LUKE 5:13).



When some of John’s disciples came to him to find out if he really was the Messiah, Jesus replied, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them” (MATT. 11:4-5). “Look at my resume,” Jesus was saying. “The prophets declared that Messiah would come to the earth and restore shalom. He would bring about justice, restoring order to God’s broken world with a special emphasis on the poor and needy. That’s exactly what I’ve been doing.”

And then there is Jesus’ famous parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus taught that on Judgment Day, his true believers would be recognized because they were the ones who had fed the hungry, given drinks to the thirsty, and visited the sick person and the prisoner.



Justice And The Early Church

The early Christians followed the example of their Lord. They paid special attention to meeting the needs of the vulnerable members of their own congregation, causing Luke to observe, “There was not a needy person among them” (ACTS 4:34). Later, the Apostle Paul reminded his churches to do justice. For example, he told the elders of the church of Ephesus: “Help the weak [...] Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he himself said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’” (ACTS 20:35). James, our Lord’s brother and an apostle in the early church, echoes the Hebrew prophets when he summarizes authentic faith: “Religion that is pure and unde-

filed before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (JAM. 1:27).⁶⁹

Justice and the New Earth

Even the Book of Revelation gets in on the act. Revelation 21 and 22 record John’s vision of the new heavens and the new earth. God will dwell on earth with human beings in a new city, the New Jerusalem, wiping away human tears and death. Justice will reign there, and he will restore shalom. This is good news because as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:58, it means that our work building towards this future kingdom is not in vain. One day Christ will return and complete the efforts that we have made in collaboration with him to restore shalom to the world. According to N.T. Wright, our hope in God’s new heaven and new earth gives meaning to our present kingdom work:



You are not oiling the wheels of a machine that’s about to roll over a cliff. You are not restoring a great painting that’s shortly going to be thrown into the fire. You are—strange though it may seem, almost as hard to believe as the resurrection itself—accomplishing something that will become in due course part of God’s new world. Every act of love, gratitude, and kindness; every work of art or music inspired by the love of God and delight in the beauty of his creation; every minute spent teaching a severely

handicapped child to read or walk; every act of care or nurture, of comfort and support, comfort one's fellow human beings and for that matter one's fellow nonhuman creatures; and of course every prayer, all Spirit-led teaching, every deed that spreads the gospel, builds up the church, embraces and embodies holiness rather than corruption, and makes the name of Jesus honored in the world—all of this will find its way, through the resurrecting power of God, into the new creation that God will one day make.⁷⁰

Working for Justice in Our City

In his book *Generous Justice*, Tim Keller proposes three ways to work for justice in one's city. The first is relief. Relief work is “direct aid to meet immediate physical, material and economic needs.”⁷¹ The Good Samaritan provided relief when he took the beaten man to his house, fed and clothed him, and got him on his way again (LUKE 10:30-35). The medical professionals who volunteer their services at inner city clinics provide relief in the form of healthcare. We can also provide relief when we give to KARM or VMC so that they can feed and clothe the homeless.

An All Souls member named Ron took this kind of relief several steps further. Five years ago, Ron befriended a homeless man named Daniel. Daniel suffers from mental illness and was sleeping on a park bench in freezing weather. Ron put Daniel up in a hotel and began working with local agencies to get Daniel housing, food, and medicine. Ron spends time with Daniel every week. While Ron was hospitalized, he used his first phone call to ask a friend to check on Daniel! That is relief work at its most tangible.

One biblical teaching about relief work often overlooked in churches is that justice begins at home. Our first commitment needs to be to the vulnerable in our own congregation. That is what the church in Acts did. They distributed resources to those in need (ACTS 2:45), and when the need became overwhelming, they appointed deacons to oversee a ministry of justice to the weaker members of their churches (ACTS 6:1-6). To that end, we established a healthcare fund for our congregation. I think we can do more. As Paul wrote to the Galatians, “Let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (GAL. 6:10). A church involved in justice work needs to live justly herself.

A second way we can work for justice in our city is through development. “This means giving an individual, family or entire community what they need to move beyond dependency or relief into a condition of economic self-sufficiency,”⁷² Keller explains. John Perkins, the founder of the Christian Community Development Association, breaks down Christian development into three R’s.

The first “R” is Relocation. Perkins observed that most attempts to help struggling neighborhoods came from the outside from people with no firsthand knowledge of what the neighborhood really needed. He came to the conclusion that what these neighborhoods really needed was for Christians to move there. Relocation involves moving into an at-risk neighborhood, making one’s home there, and becoming a part of it.

The second “R” is Redistribution. Perkins spent much of his life ministering in poor communities and saw that when well-intended people, whether government workers or church members, just gave money to an at-risk neighborhood, the money did not stay in the neighborhood. It went to the landlord, banker, or grocery store owner who lived somewhere else. Redistribution means bringing jobs into the neighborhood, training leaders, and investing in schools in the neighborhood so that the people of the neighborhood can get the jobs. It also means supporting the churches in the neighborhood.

The third “R” is Reconciliation. Perkins grew up in Mississippi and was nearly beaten to death by a sheriff during the Civil Rights movement. God gave him the grace to forgive his attacker. He realized that for community development to be successful, outsiders, who were often white, had to become a part of the solution. At the same time, insiders, who were often black, needed to be empowered to lead. Before white and blacks can collaborate, they must do the hard work of racial reconciliation.

Cathy and Adrian have been seeking the peace of their at-risk neighborhood since 1996. They have reared their children there and served on community boards. They have taken their elderly neighbors to see the doctor and helped them do the paperwork to apply for grants from KUB when their winter heating bills skyrocket. For a number of years, Adrian even rented an office in a renovated building in the neighborhood. At first, their presence in the neighborhood was resented, but as the years have gone by, reconciliation has occurred.

Development work is not for everyone. You have to be called to it, or you will be another guilt-ridden evangelical who burns more bridges than you build.

Development work is not for everyone. You have to be called to it, or you will be another guilt-ridden evangelical who burns more bridges than you build. As a church, we don't practice development in one particular neighborhood, but many of our members are putting the three R's into practice in neighborhoods across the city. Perhaps you'll be called to join them.

The third way of working for justice in the city is through Reform. Reform, according to Keller, "moves beyond the relief of immediate needs and dependency and seeks to change the conditions and social structures that aggravate or cause that dependency."⁷³ Imagine that every time the Good Samaritan takes the road from Jerusalem to Jericho he finds another man lying by the side of the road, beaten and robbed. Eventually, he needs to inquire deeper, "Surely there must be something more that we can do to stop this violence! Can some soldiers protect the road? Can the road be widened? Can new laws be passed that make travel on the road safer?" A vision for reform gives rise to these questions.

In the early nineties, community leaders noticed that the College Homes housing project in Mechanicsville spawned drug abuse and violence. They formed citizen groups, and churches spoke out. After-school programs sprang up. Yet, the cycle of addiction and violence continued to spread. Eventually community leaders developed a plan to tear down the project and replace it with the single-family homes that are there today. Mechanicsville still has problems, but considerably less violence and drug abuse occurs there today than in years past. Reform brought a measure of peace to Mechanicsville.

Be Careful Why You Serve

I'm a sucker for a great sermon or a great book. Certain phrases ring in my ears, and certain images haunt me. The arguments refuse to stop pleading their case, even after I've left the building or turned out the lights. God has definitely used the words of others to sharpen my call to the city. Several examples come to mind: Jack Hayford's sermon on racial reconciliation at the Atlanta Promise Keepers Conference in 1996; the night John Perkins spoke at Tribe One in Knoxville; Charles Marsh's *Beloved Community*; Ray Bakke's *A Theology As Big As The City*; Jonathan Edwards' *Humble Attempt*; a John Piper podcast on prayer and mission I listened to while jogging in the Cayman Islands; and Thomas Merton's *Seven Story Mountain*.

I should also include the two semesters that I spent with Dr. Jeff Norrell, studying the history of Christian social reform movements in America. I was taking graduate classes at The University of Tennessee while All Souls



*The more I read,
the more guilty I
felt: guilty for be-
ing selfish; guilty
for not caring;
guilty for not giv-
ing; guilty for be-
ing white; guilty
for having two
good parents;
guilty for living in
a nice house; guilty
for not suffering
as much as other
people; and guilty
for the sins of my
ancestors.*

Church was taking shape. The idea that a Christian, especially an evangelical Christian, should care about social reform was quite new to me. Dr. Norrell introduced me to a significant part of my Christian family that thought differently. We read about thirty books together and discussed

them over lunch on Tuesdays. I didn't always agree with what I read, but I was exposed to a wide range of Christian writers who had a lot to say about justice. One afternoon, we read from Martin Luther King's sermon to the graduating class of Oberlin College in the spring of 1965:



All I'm saying is simply this: that all life is interrelated, that somehow we're caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied to a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. For some strange reason, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.⁷⁴

I knew King was right. Many of the other books had taken up a similar refrain. We are in this together. I should care more about my neighbor. The more I read, the more guilty I felt: guilty for being selfish; guilty for not caring; guilty for not giving; guilty for being white; guilty for having two good parents; guilty for living in a nice house; guilty for not suffering as much as other people; and guilty for the sins of my ancestors. My guilt made me want to do something, anything, to make it right.

I look back now with great fondness on those afternoons reading with Dr. Norrell. God was speaking to me, but I don't believe that all the guilt I was feeling came from God. "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret," Paul explains, "but worldly

sorrow brings death” (NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION 2 COR.7:10). I experienced both worldly and godly sorrow over my sins against my neighbor. Reading about the black experience during the Civil Rights Movement, for example, genuinely convicted me of the horrors of racism and the role I have played. I experienced a godly sorrow that eventually led me to coach a mostly black urban swim team for kids who otherwise would never get the opportunity. But when a Spirit-given shame quietly metastasized into a toxic sense of shame, I found myself thinking, “I’m bad. I’m wrong. The whole system I’m a part of is garbage.” A dark shadow fell over my soul, filling me with bitterness. I became judgmental towards those who “didn’t get it.” I forced service opportunities that didn’t really exist. I constantly felt I wasn’t doing enough. I was trying to atone for my own white guilt. You can probably guess how well that worked out.

Here is what I have learned: the only people who last in justice work are those who have responded to a genuine call from the Holy Spirit.

Here is what I have learned: the only people who last in justice work are those who have responded to a genuine call from the Holy Spirit. This calling will likely include godly sorrow that leads to repentance. It’s good to feel godly sorrow the first time you realize that a little boy

is starving two miles away while you enjoy a ten-dollar hamburger. It's good to feel the weight of that. Give God time. Pray. Talk. He'll show you what to do with the godly sorrow you are feeling. All of life is interrelated. Remember that guilt does not constitute a call. It's very easy to volunteer somewhere or write a check because you feel sorry for a person or you feel guilty about how much better your life is. Guilt and pity can propel you into practicing justice, but you won't last.

How Troy and Melissa Practiced Justice

Troy and Melissa understand this. Early in their marriage, they became aware of the needs of foster children. They are compassionate people willing to sacrifice a great deal for others, and their hearts broke when they heard about children needing homes. They waited, they prayed, and when the time was right, they took two lovely boys into their home. For a while, Troy and Melissa thought that they would adopt the boys, but then they began sharing Christ with the boys' mother. They invited her to come to their church. She came, and she eventually gave her life to Jesus. Her life changed so significantly, in fact, that the court ruled in her favor and the boys returned to her. Troy and Melissa worship with the boys and their mother every Sunday. That's justice.

CHAPTER NINE:

Politics

A reporter asked people to share the first word that came into their mind when they thought of politics. “Dirty,” one person replied. “Corrupt,” answered another. “Unethical,” said a third. Many Christians are as equally suspicious about politics as the people interviewed by the reporter. As one young woman in my congregation recently told me, “I just feel cynical about politics and politicians. I don’t want anything to do with it.” She’s not alone. A father I know encouraged his daughter to spend her summer between college and medical school working on a political campaign of her choice. “It wasn’t even an option for her,” the dad said. “She had no interest whatsoever.”

A sharp young Christian could make a number of legitimate arguments to support not working in politics for a summer. For example, her gifts and passions might lie in other areas, or she might simply prefer a job that paid more. But many Christians avoid politics because the

church has failed to give them a theological vision for entering the public square. God commands the exiles to seek the peace and prosperity, the *shalom*, of their city. This command still applies to the church today, even while we live as exiles in a city that is only partly our home (1 PET. 1:1; JAM. 1:1). The question remains, can politics be a shalom-making practice?

Many Christians are wary of engaging in these political processes and feel that politics is messy and morally ambiguous.

So What Do We Mean By “Politics” Anyway?

Political science professor Nate Kelly defines politics as “the process through which societies determine who gets what, as well as when and how they get it.”⁷⁵ Citizens can be involved in the political process at many levels. Examples of political involvement include voting, serving on the board of a homeowners association, campaigning, writing letters to government leaders, attending a public meeting, lobbying, drafting legislation, or running for an elected office. Many Christians are wary of engaging in these political processes and feel that politics is messy and morally ambiguous. Yet, they must still honestly examine the solid biblical reasons for Christians to practice politics as a way of seeking the peace of their cities.



God’s Cultural Mandate

For starters, consider God’s command. God created our first parents in his image and told them to take dominion over all the earth (GEN. 1:27-28). Many responsibilities flow out of this command. For us, having dominion over all the earth means bringing the influence of Christ to bear to the many different institutions and structures that make up society. One of these institutions is government. “Just governance is part of our calling in creation.”⁷⁶

Theologian Michael Allen warns against a dualistic reading of the bible that falsely divides life into spiritual and secular realms. This dualism, he argues, is similar to the ancient heresy of Gnosticism and leads the Christian to value “spiritual” practices like prayer and evangelism, while devaluing “secular” practices like business and poli-

tics. This dualistic split is profoundly unbiblical. “The blessed mandate [...] commanding Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply, to spread out and have dominion, to extend God’s glory across the whole globe [...] suggests that familial, social, political, and economic activities are part of God’s good intentions for the world,” Allen writes. “A theology of engagement with the world in all its intricacies must not be played off against the spiritual life.”⁷⁷

Christ is Lord of All.

Christians can engage in politics as a means of blessing their community because we believe that Jesus is Lord over all of life. Paul opens his letter to the believers in the city of Colossae by reminding them of Christ’s all-encompassing Lordship:



For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

(NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION, COL. 1:16-17)

We engage in the political process because Christ is Lord of all of life, including politics. If we limit our involvement in the city only to our families, churches, and businesses, then we ignore the all-encompassing Lordship of Christ over every facet of life.

Government as God's Gift

Christians considering politics as shalom-making should also remember that government is a gift from God. Paul explained the God-given nature of government in his letter to the Christians, living in the city of Rome. “There is no authority except that which God has established,” Paul reminded the tiny house church, worshipping in Caesar’s shadow. “The authorities that exist have been established by God [...] The one in authority is God’s servant for your good (NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION, ROM. 13:1-7). If God establishes government and if those who serve in government are God’s servants for good, then it follows that Christians can and should serve in the government.

Politics as Shalom Making

The political process actually provides a wonderful opportunity to seek shalom and love our neighbors. Good governments help people live better lives. Paul urges that prayers be made “for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life” (1 TIM. 2:2). Good governments help people live a peaceful and godly life, and bad governments hinder that. Nate Kelly explains, “The well-being of both ourselves and our neighbors is heavily influenced by politics. Since politics is the process of determining who gets what, when and how then participating in that process is directly contributing to how our neighbors are treated.”⁷⁸

Former City Councilman Chris Woodhull says the goal of politics is “to build a place that works for everybody, a real place, a community with social equity, a commu-

nity where everyone has economic access, a community that is economically sound and livable.”⁷⁹ In other words, politics can be shalom-making.



God clearly commands us to seek the good of the communities where we live. “If believers are to seek to bring good [...,] that must include bringing good to its government,”

theologian Wayne Grudem asserts. “The true ‘welfare’ of such a city will be advanced through governmental laws and policies that are consistent with God’s teachings in the Bible.”⁸⁰

In The Presence of Many Witnesses

God’s people have often worked in and through the political process as a means of making shalom. Consider the example of Daniel. Daniel was part of the community of exiles living in Babylon who received the letter from Jeremiah, telling them to seek the peace of their city. King Nebuchadnezzar made Daniel a ruler over the whole province of Babylon and the chief prefect over all his counselors (DAN. 2:48). Daniel became one of the king’s most trusted

advisors, and Daniel speaks truth to him when the King's pride brings about his downfall (DAN. 4:31-32).

A number of other scriptures describe godly men and women who were involved with politics. Joseph served as a high-ranking cabinet member in Pharaoh's government (GEN. 41:37-45). Nehemiah served in a position of high responsibility before King Artaxerxes of Persia (NEH. 1.1). Mordecai was second in rank to King Ahasuerus of Persia (ESTH. 10:3), and Queen Esther also exercised significant influence over his policies (ESTH. 5:1-8). Old Testament prophets wrote letters to the leaders of foreign nations, lobbying against injustice (ISA. 13-23; JER. 46-51; EZEK. 25-32; AMOS 1-2).

The early church carried on this tradition. Christians played a vital role in outlawing infanticide, child abandonment, and abortion in the Roman Empire; in outlawing the brutal death battles in which thousands of gladiators died; in outlawing the cruel punishment of branding the faces of criminals; in instituting prison reforms, such as the segregating of male and female prisoners; in stopping the practice of human sacrifice among the Irish; in outlawing pedophilia; in the granting of property rights and other protections to women; in banning polygamy; in prohibiting the burning alive of widows in India; in outlawing the practice of binding young women's feet in China; in persuading government officials to begin a system of public schools in Germany; and in abolishing slavery.⁸¹

Leadership Matters

Christians should also be engaged in politics because politics is all about leadership. Leadership matters. God has built a certain order into the world, and leadership is part of that order. God gives his people leaders so that their communities will thrive. He instructed Israel to choose wise leaders who will govern them well. Moses delegated authority to “wise, understanding and respected” leaders who will exercise justice fairly (DEUT. 1:10-18). Israel’s kings were to execute justice and protect the needy as God’s representatives (Ps. 72). Proverbs exhorted the political leaders of Israel: “Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy” (PROV. 31:8-9). When Israel’s leaders failed to lead justly, the prophets condemned them (Is. 1:10). Ezekiel even blamed the national decline of Israel on the failure of “the shepherds of Israel” (EZEK. 34:1-8). In the New Testament, Paul teaches us to pray for our political leaders, so that we will enjoy a peaceful life (1 TIM. 2:1-7).

A fish rots from the head down.

America is not Israel. But God’s principles still apply. Communities flourish under strong leadership, and they decline under poor leadership. A fish rots from the head down.

Richmond Flowers was the Attorney General of Alabama from 1963-1967. Mr. Flowers was best known for his opposition of Governor George Wallace’s policy of racial segregation. Mr. Flowers and his family paid a heavy price for his stand for justice. In retirement, he reflected on the legacy of the civil rights movement with a reporter who wrote a biography on his life. He came to this conclusion: “Alabama suffered a fundamental failure in leadership during the civil rights revolution [...] The failure contributed significantly to the manner in which the state responded to the demand for social change [...] The transition would have been less disruptive and its consequences less harmful if leadership had been more insightful and prudent.”⁸²

You don’t have to be a Christian to be a good leader, but Christians should look for opportunities to provide good leadership for their communities. We pull no punches when criticizing the “idiots” in Washington or the “jerks” in town hall, and we are quick to complain about mud-slinging in political ads or mean-spirited debates. When we ourselves are unwilling to step up and serve, we get the kind of leadership that we deserve. You may have heard this quote attributed to Edmund Burke: “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

Guiding Principles

I have tried to make a biblical case for seeking the peace of the city through politics. Let's consider some principles for doing just that:

1. **Serve Christ as Lord.** We are followers of Christ before we are Democrats, Republicans, or Libertarians. Our first and most important allegiance is to Him. We are accountable to Christ first. Partisan affiliations come second. Faithfulness, not winning, is the most important thing.
2. **Trust in a sovereign God.** Every election year, pundits from both sides of the political fence solemnly declare that if the other side wins, then civilization, as we know it, will end. We need to shut our ears to this kind of rhetoric. Our ultimate hope resides in God, not a candidate or political party.
3. **Love your neighbor.** Jesus commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves (MARK 12:29). Whether we are talking about an election over a cup of coffee or debating with another candidate, love should govern our political activities. To this end, we would do well to learn some South African history.

After years of racial injustice, the new South Africa faced the difficult task of moving forward after the crimes of apartheid. The nation's leaders asked Archbishop Desmond Tutu to lead the Truth and Reconciliation Com-

mission, a government project that exposed racial crimes and then pursued reconciliation between the oppressors and the oppressed. The archbishop argued that the only way forward for his scarred nation was to practice *ubuntu*, a Zulu word that carries the understanding that we are all in this together and therefore need to be kind, generous, and compassionate. In Tutu's words, "A person with *ubuntu* [...] know[s] that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they are less than who they are."⁸³ The archbishop lived out his commitment to *ubuntu* in the midst of intense racial hatred. Love governed the way he treated his friends, and his enemies in the political process.

4. Walk humbly. Christians believe that God has revealed eternal truth in His scripture, but that God has not revealed the precise way to apply these truths in every complex policy decision. For example, good Christians may agree that government should care for the weaker members of the community, but they may seriously disagree about the best way to do this. The doctrine of the fall should make us wary of being absolutely certain of our political convictions. Sin has weakened our minds. We all see in the mirror dimly (1 COR. 13:12). Our passionate convictions aren't always right. Given the delicate process of applying God's eternal truths to complex political questions, we must strive to be faithful to God's truth while recognizing the necessity of political compromises. "God's word is truth. Biblical principles are

absolute. But our applications of God’s truth are often fumbling and shrouded in the fog produced by extremely complex situations, missing facts, and the pressures of limited time,” explain political writers Stephen Monsma and Mark Rodgers. “All this means that when one is asked to compromise by accepting only some of what one is seeking to achieve, one is not being asked to compromise absolute principles of right and wrong.”⁸⁴

5. Disagree respectfully. Here are the titles of a few recent books on current affairs by conservative writers: *Arguing With Idiots: How to Stop Small Minds and Big Government*; *Gangster Government: Barack Obama and the New Washington Thugocracy*; *Demonic: How the Liberal Mob is Endangering America*. Here are titles of a few books on current affairs by liberal writers: *Pitchforks and Torches: The Worst of the Worst, from Beck, Bill and Bush to Palin and Other Posturing Republicans*; *Wingnuts: How the Lunatic Fringe is Hijacking America*; *The Wrecking Crew: How Conservatives Ruined Government, Enriched Themselves, and Beggared the Nation*. We obviously struggle to disagree respectfully!

Concerned about the harsh tone of political rhetoric, Republican businessman and political adviser Mark DeMoss began the Civility Project in January 2009. DeMoss asked his friend, Democratic lobbyist and former Clinton aide, Lanny Davis, to help him. The two friends wrote all 100 United States senators, all 435 members of the House of Representatives, and all 50 state governors.

They asked each politician to endorse a simple pledge:

“I will be civil in my public discourse and behavior.”

“I will be respectful to others whether or not I agree with them.”

“I will stand against incivility when I see it.”

Only three politicians responded. DeMoss shut down the Civility Project two years later. He told a reporter that he had been criticized via email “with some words I would not use in this phone call.” He continued, “This political divide has become so sharp that everything is black and white, and too many conservatives see no redeeming value in any liberal or Democrat.”⁸⁵ The scriptures teach that all human beings are made in the image of God. The Apostle Paul declared in his sermon to the Athenians that all human beings are children of the same Father (ACTS 17:22-33). All human beings are worthy of our respect, even when we disagree with them.

Embarrassed for Knocking?

A member of our congregation shared with me that he was going to take a few days off from work and knock on doors for the candidate whom he supported. He seemed embarrassed to admit this, and I asked him why.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I’m not sure people would understand why I am so passionate about this.” I think he’s

I think he's passionate about this because God's word is alive in his heart. He is seeking the peace of the city through politics.

passionate about this because God's word is alive in his heart. He is seeking the peace of the city through politics.

We'll give John Calvin the last word. Writing in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, the Reformer said with a generous helping of exaggeration that serving in politics was “a calling not only holy and lawful before God, but also the most sacred and by far the most honorable of all callings in the whole life of mortal men.”⁸⁶

CHAPTER TEN:

Partnership

*Bob Lupton has spent forty years living and ministering in an at-risk inner-city Atlanta neighborhood. Over the years he has seen churches launch one program after another, trying to seek the peace of his corner of the city. Lupton believes that many of these well-intentioned attempts to help have done more harm than good. He sets forth his case on page one of *Toxic Charity*:*



In the United States, there's a growing scandal that we both refuse to see and actively perpetuate [...] I have worked with churches, government agencies, entrepreneurs, and armies of volunteers and know from first hand experience the many ways "good intentions" can translate into ineffective care or even harm [...] Our entire society—from school children to corporate CEOs, from small churches to massive government agencies—

upholds the wonderful value that helping others is a big part of the American character [...] The compassion industry is almost universally accepted as a virtuous and constructive enterprise. But what is so surprising is that its outcomes are almost entirely unexamined [...] Those [in the neighborhood]—on the receiving end of this outpouring of generosity—quietly admit that it may be hurting more than helping.⁸⁷

Cats And Toasters

Urban missiologist Doug Hall believes one reason why big-hearted folks trying to make a difference in a city often do more harm than good is because they fail to see that the city is more like a cat than a toaster.

Suppose there is something wrong with your toaster. You take a screwdriver, pop off the metal plate on the bottom, pull out the broken part, stick in a new one, and screw the plate back on. You fix the toaster this way. But



We need to approach the city as a large, interrelated system, in which one part is connected to every other part.

suppose your cat has a problem. You cannot take out a screwdriver, open up your cat, disassemble her, and put her back together. The cat is a living system. All the parts of the cat are interrelated. This is why cities are much more like cats than they are like toasters. We need to approach the city as a large, interrelated system, in which one part is connected to every other part.⁸⁸

To use another simile, cities are like the mobiles that we put over our baby's cribs to keep them entertained. My wife and I hung one with different airplanes over one of our girls' cribs. When she would hit one airplane, all the airplanes were jarred into new positions. Systems work that way. When you touch one part of the system, you set off reactions in other parts of the system of which you weren't aware. I found a good illustration of how

When you enter a city and start trying to make changes — even when your heart is in the right place — you don't always know what the unintended consequences might be. You may do more harm than good.

small changes in a system can have major, unintended effects in a science fiction novel. The main character went back in time millions of years and accidentally crushed a butterfly when he stepped off his space ship. Upon returning to his own time, the whole world had changed. One

small, seemingly insignificant action had long-term consequences. This same phenomenon happens in cities.

The Law of Unintended Consequences

Sociologists call this the “law of unintended consequences.” When you enter a city and start trying to make changes—even when your heart is in the right place—you don’t always know what the unintended consequences might be. You may do more harm than good.

Lupton recalls the Christmas Eve when he was enjoying a cup of coffee with a family in his urban neighborhood. A knock came at the front door. A well-dressed family from the suburbs had brought armfuls of neatly wrapped gifts. Lupton caught a glimpse of the children’s father as he quietly slipped out of the room. “I was witnessing



a side [of charity] I had never noticed before,” Lupton writes. “How a father is emasculated in his own home in front of his wife and children for not being able to provide presents for his family [...] how children get the message that the ‘good stuff’ comes from the rich people out there and is free.”⁸⁹

Lupton’s book pains me because it reminds me of the many times I have tried to bring solutions to urban problems without fully understanding the situation’s complex dynamics. When we began All Souls Church, we were excited about our vision for a church in the city. We had the resources, and we came downtown and started a church. In retrospect, I see that we didn’t spend enough time patiently listening to and learning from the leaders who were already ministering downtown. As a result, some of those leaders felt disrespected. Though they have extended grace to me and we have become friends, I regret that I put them in a position where forgiveness was needed!



I also wonder about the unintended consequences of some of my other well-intentioned urban initiatives over the years. I think of the partnership we formed at my former

church with an African American congregation whose pastor had become a good friend. Our congregations built a Habitat house together. We invited their choir to our church and enjoyed a powerful evening of worship together. But then I got excited about some other new initiative and let the partnership fade away. Could you blame that congregation for being suspicious the next time a young white pastor, convicted by a book he read on racial reconciliation while at the beach, shows up eager to form a partnership?

Lupton's book brings to mind the many conversations I've had over the years with well-intentioned Christians who want to serve the city but have no idea what they are doing or how the city works. The conversation usually goes something like this:

Well-Intentioned Guy: "God has given me a vision to start an after-school ministry in Mechanicsville. I'm raising funds. Do you know who I can talk to?"

Me: "Let's back up a second. How long have you been in our city?"

Well-Intentioned Guy: "About six months now. The cool thing is that God clearly told me to do this in a prophetic dream."

Me: "I believe God speaks to us through dreams. But there are a lot of people in Mechanicsville who share the

same dream and already have after-school ministries going. Have you talked to any of them?”

Well-Intentioned Guy: “Uh...no. Pastor, can we be totally honest here? [Well-intentioned guy leans forward and speaks in a solemn tone.] So many of these urban ministries don’t really preach the gospel. We want to start a Christ-centered ministry to help these kids and really glorify God. Can I count on your support?”

Me: “No.”

Well-Intentioned Guy does means well, and God may be truly calling him to an afterschool ministry. But he does not understand that the neighborhood he plans to enter is a complex, interrelated system. He does not understand that when he sets up his after-school ministry, he will pull away resources from other afterschool ministries that neighborhood churches and ministries already provide. He will stir up competition, jealousy, and bitterness. He will put the children in an awkward dilemma, especially if his program offers something more enticing, such as field trips or better snacks. He will weaken the effectiveness of existing, under-resourced programs and will harm the very neighborhood that he intended to help.

Lupton’s book also reminds me of how often the law of unintended consequences comes into play in the city. Consider the following scenario. You are walking to your car after church. A homeless man steps out of the shad-

ows, tells a story about the kids waiting in his car, and asks for a few dollars to feed them dinner. How can you say no? Doesn't Jesus tell us to care for the least of these? You empty your wallet.

Ginny Weatherstone, Chief Executive Officer, Volunteer Ministries Center, would discourage this act of seeming generosity. She suggests that instead of giving the homeless money, you should give them information about where they "might receive help." She shared some surprising insights with a reporter:



Many of Knoxville's panhandlers are not homeless and it's not accurate to assume that they are [...] There are adequate services in Knoxville to meet the immediate needs of the homeless [...] Three meals a day are served at KARM and you do not have to be enrolled in a program to get a meal there [...] Other agencies serve meals, VMC being one of them, but they may require you to be involved with particular programming [...] They have options without resorting to panhandling.⁹⁰

In other words, giving money to a panhandler can actually enable a destructive lifestyle. Your generosity may actually keep people on the streets!

Joining the Father Where He is Already at Work

So what can we do? Whenever we feel led by God to serve our city in any way, we must remember that God

is already at work. He and his people have been active in our city for a long time. James White started a Presbyterian Church here before the city was even built! Instead of launching new programs and initiatives, it is far better to discern where the Father is already at work and then join Him there. This is the practice of partnership. Before we start new ministries, we find ways to nourish and partner with the ones that already exist.

Jesus himself did not initiate ministry in a vacuum but discerned where the Father was already working and joined in. For example, Jesus healed a man on the Sabbath. When asked why he does this if no work was to be done on the Sabbath, Jesus replied, “My Father is working until now, and I am working [...] The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise” (JOHN 5:17, 20). We can be confident that the Father is *already* at work in our city. We seek the peace of our city most effectively when we join the Father where he is *already* at work.

Instead of starting our own school for the arts, we partner with the Joy of Music School. Instead of starting our own housing ministry, our hammer-and-nail people partner with Habitat for Humanity or Knoxville Leadership Foundation. Instead of starting yet another homeless ministry, we volunteer with KARM and VMC. Instead of launching our own urban gardening initiative, we bring our shovels to Beardsley Farm. Instead of bringing our own nurse on staff to establish a healthcare ministry

for the poor, our nurses volunteer with the Interfaith Health Clinic or the Free Medical Clinic. Instead of starting a ministry to immigrants, we serve Iraqi refugees in partnership with Global Seeds or Hispanic refugees by partnering with El Puente. Instead of creating our own ministry to children, our members partner with neighborhood elementary schools, the Amachi mentoring program, SOAR, Tribe One, the inner city Boy Scouts, the YMCA, urban Young Life, Emerald Youth Foundation, or the Great Schools Partnership.

The Witness of Partnership

When we partner with other Christians in the city to bring *shalom*, we fulfill one of our Lord's last prayers. In his final prayer for the disciples, Jesus prays that his church will witness to the world through her unity:



I do not ask for these only, but for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father are in me, and I in you, that they may also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that the world may know that you have sent me and loved them as you have loved me.

(JOHN 17:20-23)

If you had asked Paul how many churches there were in our city, he would have responded, "One." Paul acknowledges that different groups of believers meet in different



One church calls Knoxville home. Yes, Baptists, Catholics, Methodists, Orthodox, Episcopalians, Christian Churches, Presbyterians, and hipsters all worship together in their own fellowships on Sundays, but we make up one church of Knoxville.

homes, yet he sees them all as part of the one city church. For example, he writes letters to “the church of God that is in Corinth” and to “the church of the Thessalonians” and to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi” (1 COR. 1:2, 1 THESS. 1:1; PHIL. 1:1). If Paul were writing us, he would address the letter to “the church of God that is in Knoxville” or “the church of the Knoxvillians” or “to all the saints who are living in Knoxville.” One church calls Knoxville home. Yes, Baptists, Catholics, Methodists, Orthodox, Episcopalians, Christian Churches, Presbyterians, and hipsters all worship together in their own fellowships on Sundays, but we make up one church of Knoxville. We display our unity as the one Church of Knoxville by partnering together in kingdom work.

Partnering As God's Nature

Grant Standefer, Executive Director of the Compassion Coalition, believes partnership is grounded in God's very nature. "The passage in John 17 is full of Father-Son relationship [or partnership] for the sake of the world," he notes. "Another passage [illustrating the partnership of the trinity] is the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3 and the overtly Trinitarian revelation of the Son, the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and the voice from heaven saying, 'This is my Son' [...]. It seems to me that our partnering is merely an outworking of the truth/reality of the community of the trinity for the sake of the world."⁹¹ It's no wonder that Christians partnering together reveal the Father to the world.

The Benefits of Partnership

Given the solid theological reasons for partnering together in shalom-making, it's not surprising that Christians are also discovering that partnerships are often more effective. Phil Butler lists several benefits of partnership in his book, *Well Connected*.⁹² He argues that effective, long-lasting partnerships offer the following benefits:

- ☞ Save critical resources, reducing duplication and waste of money, people and assets
- ☞ Engage the whole range of spiritual gifts distributed within the church

- ☞ Share risk, allowing us to consider ideas and dreams that, going it alone, would seem unthinkable.
- ☞ Empower believers to celebrate diversity while working together in unity.

Bring credibility to God’s message as we demonstrate the power of restored relationships.

Release the power of the Holy Spirit in ways rarely seen when we work independently.

Bring hope as participants realize they are not facing the challenge alone.

Partnering with Others of Good Will

What about partnering with our Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, and secular neighbors in projects aimed at the common good? Unless the organization works directly against the mission that God has given us in the world, such partnerships seem like a good idea.

Christians in the past have partnered with others of goodwill in seeking *shalom*. In the nineteenth century William Wilberforce partnered with Unitarians and agnostics in his battle against slavery. The President of World Vision, Richard Stearns, recently addressed the question of partnering with neighbors of good will in the *Huffington Post*. “It is true that faith-based and secular organizations will have their differences,” he writes. “Yet,

while nearly 21,000 children die every day of largely preventable causes, we must not allow our differences to hinder our progress when the contributions of all are desperately needed.” Stearns concludes, “If we respect one another’s differences and recognize that with those various worldviews come important strengths, then we can break through impediments to accomplish the greater good. There is room for everyone in the fight against poverty and injustice.”⁹³



First, Do No Harm

We do mean well, but our attempts to help often do more harm than good. Lupton offers dozens of painful examples from all over the world. The money spent by one campus ministry to cover the costs of their Central American mission trip to repaint an orphanage would have been enough to hire two local painters and

two full-time teachers and purchase new uniforms for every student in the school. Christian students spent \$2.4 billion on mission trips in 2005, yet local leaders often feel that these trips turn their own people into beggars. An Atlanta real-estate developer with an enormous heart and deep-pocketed friends raised millions to transform a ravaged inner-city neighborhood, but the project turned ugly. The residents in the neighborhood didn’t trust the

developer. Lawsuits were filed. The project collapsed, and race relations were set back fifty years.

As we seek the peace of our city, we will continue to make messes. All of us will inevitably violate the law of unintended consequences. On the other hand, we cannot allow fear to paralyze us. We can minimize our mistakes and maximize our impact if we take the time to discern where the Father is already at work and then join Him there. The surgeon's adage, "First, do no harm," offers a helpful reminder when you begin exploring ways to serve your city. It's wise to go slowly, listen, and respond to God's lead.

EPILOGUE:

The Both/And Gospel

An African-American teenager I'll call Markel wrote a rap song about his experience in Knoxville shortly before going to jail. I've edited some of it but left some potentially offensive words in so that we can feel a bit of what he was feeling:



I would be shot down, but I feel bullet proof

I'm not where I want to be at the age of 26

F... Tennessee, you all can have this place

You can't take a piss without the police in your face

This wouldn't be happen if it was car jackin

I feel violated and more. I don't know how to say it.

2010 was suppose to be my summer.

Now I'm headed to the pen.

Done lost my car. Damn, I can't win.

Now I got to start over again.

Sell a little Crack, make some new friends

Dish out the end.

You got monkey on your back.

I give the N... a banana.

What does it mean to share the good news of the gospel with Markel? Christians have not always agreed on the answer to this question. During the nineteenth century, most evangelical leaders believed that the gospel offered hope to both individuals and to society. Charles Finney, the great revival preacher of the nineteenth century, taught that everywhere the gospel was preached there must also be reform. “When evangelicals entered the slums as soul-winners,” writes social historian David Moberg, they established “gospel missions, employment bureaus, orphanages, and other agencies to meet the needs of the

What does it mean to share the good news of the gospel with Markel?

poor.”⁹⁴ Finney and other evangelicals worked to form societies that focused on both evangelism and social reform: The American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, The American Anti-slavery Society, and The American Temperance Society are notable examples.⁹⁵ These Christians believed that proclaiming the gospel meant both personal evangelism and caring for the poor.

The Great Reversal

By the 1870s, however, another evangelist had risen to take Finney’s place. His name was Dwight Moody. Moody at first embraced blending gospel preaching with a call for social action, but after the Great Chicago Fire in 1871, Moody changed his approach to ministry. From then on, Moody focused exclusively on saving souls. He said, “I look upon this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said, ‘Moody, save all you can.’”⁹⁶ The world, Moody believed, was going to get worse and worse until the Second Coming of Christ. At that time Christ would establish a thousand year reign on earth. Moody had little hope that social conditions would improve before then. Following Moody, many evangelical Christians became suspicious of any gospel message mingled with a broader social concern. The historian Timothy L. Smith has called this shift “The Great Reversal.”⁹⁷

The writings of Walter Rauschenbusch heightened wariness of a gospel that addressed both personal and social sin. A Baptist seminary professor, Rauschenbusch was overcome by the needs of the poor while ministering in Hells Kitchen in New York City. As he read the scriptures

and lived among the poor, he came to a very different understanding of the gospel than Moody had. In 1907 he published his thoughts in a book entitled *Christianity and the Social Crisis*.

Christianity and the Social Crisis was one of the books that I read while studying with Dr. Jeff Norrell at The University of Tennessee. I had never read anything quite like it. Rauschenbusch emphasized the corporate nature of sin. He argued from both the prophets and the gospels that the true work of the kingdom of God involves solving social problems. The Baptist theologian wrote with the fire of a prophet. He makes a compelling case for a broad gospel that includes care for the poor. His words moved and convicted me, but I also felt a twinge of disappointment. Rauschenbusch's gospel has little place for the atoning work of the cross. His intense focus on social sin does not address the problem of personal sin. He seems to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Rauschenbusch's teachings eventually led to what is known as the Social Gospel movement, and conservative Christians wanted nothing to do with it.

Civil War

The Protestant church in America split, at least in part, over these two understandings of the gospel. Followers of Moody were called "Fundamentalists" because they focused on what they believed were fundamental doctrines of the faith. They felt that the gospel was salvation, God saving souls, and that the church was wasting its time doing anything else. By contrast, followers of

the Social Gospel focused on bringing in the kingdom of God through social reform. A Civil War ensued with salvos fired from pulpits on both sides. From his Boston pulpit, Fundamentalist A.C. Dixon attacked “the false evangelism which hoped to save society in bulk by means of humanitarian work.”⁹⁸ Rauschenbusch countered, “As long as a man sees in our present society only a few inevitable abuses and recognizes no sin and evil deep-seated in the very constitution of the present order, he is still in a state of moral blindness and without conviction of sin.”⁹⁹ The two sides barely spoke to one another for the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1947, theologian Carl Henry, one of the founders of Fuller Seminary and the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today*, published a book called *The Uneasy Conscience of Fundamentalism*. Henry did not endorse the social gospel, which he felt was too critical of personal faith, but he did harshly criticize Fundamentalism as a movement that “by passed suffering humanity.”¹⁰⁰ Since then, a growing number of Christians have sought a middle way between the extreme definitions of the gospel found in both Fundamentalism and the Social Gospel.

A Both/And Gospel?

Many believers have since concluded that the gospel is both/and rather than either/or: The good news of the gospel is *both* that Christ has saved us from our sins *and* that Christ is restoring all things to himself. Rick Dunn, the senior pastor of Fellowship Church, has written a good both/and definition of the gospel:



The gospel is God's offer of new life, given by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, to transform individuals, families, communities and cities into His new creation.

But is a both/and gospel biblical? Let's begin with Jesus. How did he understand the gospel? Mark's gospel describes the ministry of Jesus in the introduction to his gospel: "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel'" (ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION MARK 1:14-15).

John the Baptist had been arrested and thrown into prison. Jesus returned to his familiar Galilee and began proclaiming the gospel of God. The word translated "gospel" is *euangelion* in Greek. It combines *angelos*, the word for announcing news, with the prefix *eu-*, which means "joyful." The gospel is the announcement of joyful news. Mark's readers knew the word already because it was used in their day to describe important news that could change your life. For example, a Roman inscription, written early in the first century A.D. about the time of Jesus, reads: "The beginning of the gospel of Caesar Augustus." To its original audience, the inscription was telling the good news—at least from the writer's perspective—that Caesar had been born and had become Roman emperor. A gospel is a special report that something big has happened in history that will affect your

life forever.¹⁰¹ The gospel of Jesus is good news, but good news about what?

Longing For The Kingdom

Jesus says this is the good news: “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (MARK 1:15). The biblical idea of the kingdom of God is deeply rooted in the Old Testament. The bible opens with God as the King who creates his kingdom. The first subjects of this peaceful kingdom soon rebel, but God moves in power and love to draw his rebellious subjects back to himself by creating the kingdom of Israel. God’s kingly rule is first expressed through the kings of Jerusalem, but one day in the future a son of David will sit on the throne and reign forever. Many devout Jews looked for the kingdom of God in Jesus’ day. They anticipated an earthly kingdom with Jerusalem as its capital. For example, Joseph of Arimathea is described as a man “looking for the kingdom of God” (LUKE 23:51). The confused disciples ask the risen Jesus, “Will you restore the kingdom at this time to Israel?” (ACTS 1:6). What they meant was, “Will you now reunite the northern and the southern kingdoms that have been torn apart for half a millennium and take back the throne from the Romans?” Even the angel Gabriel was excited about the coming kingdom of God! He tells Mary that her child will sit on the throne of David and reign forever (LUKE 1:33).

To summarize, the Old Testament anticipated a day when God’s Son would reign over the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus said, “I have good news! The time is fulfilled. The king has returned to take his throne.”

But what is the kingdom of God? It's an important question because the kingdom of God is the center of the preaching of Jesus and the early church. When the crowds beg him to stay, Jesus responded, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to other towns as well" (LUKE 4:43). He spent forty days after his resurrection, teaching the disciples about the kingdom of God (ACTS 1:3). Philip preached good news about the kingdom of God to the Samaritans (ACTS 8:12). Paul entered the synagogue in Ephesus and reasoned with his countrymen about the kingdom of God (ACTS 19:8-10). Luke tells us that Paul spent his final days in Rome, under house arrest, receiving visitors and "testifying to the kingdom of God" from morning to evening (ACTS 28:23).

You don't have to read too far into the gospels to realize that Jesus was clarifying and expanding the prevailing notions of what the kingdom will be like. How does Jesus understand the kingdom of God? We find three characteristics of the kingdom of God in his teaching and ministry.

The King of the Kingdom is Christ

Jesus is the king of the kingdom of God. He told Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world" (JOHN 18:36). He commanded the disciples with royal authority, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples" (MATT. 28:18). John described him as "the ruler of kings on earth" (REV. 1:5). Christ rules his kingdom from heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of the Father (EPH. 1:20). One day, he will hand the kingdom over to his Father after destroying

every rule and every authority and power (1 COR. 15:24). On that day, as Handel's Hallelujah Chorus affirms, "the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever and ever, King of kings and Lord of lords."

This is good news. There is a loving, powerful, holy ruler of the universe. True, a great deal of the universe is in rebellion, either passively or actively, against the true King. Yes, much that happens in a fallen world does not align with his ultimate vision. Yet this is what Christ proclaimed as his gospel: The kingdom of God has broken in, and Jesus is that kingdom's king.

Proclaiming the gospel means sharing with our friends and neighbors the good news that they are not alone in the universe, that life is not mere chaos and randomness, that a good and loving and just God-King is mysteriously yet powerfully at work in and through and around both the beauty and tragedy of this life.

How desperately our friends and neighbors need to know this! I'm reminded of how many Americans get through life under an empty heaven when Sandi and I watch our favorite TV show, *Parenthood*. We like the show because most of the characters are trying to do the right thing. They fail and ask forgiveness. They love difficult family members. They help each other. We find the show both inspiring and tragic. No character has any kind of relationship with God. They have one another, but that is it. They are left alone in the world as they face autism, fore-

closure, aging, and death. The good news of the gospel is that we are not alone in the universe. Christ is the King.

The King Reigns from a Cross

Devout Jews in Jesus' day expected their king to reign from David's throne in Jerusalem. Jesus astounded them by teaching that he will reign over his kingdom from a cross:



And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things [...] and be killed, and after three days rise again.
(MARK 8:31)

For he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise." (MARK 9:31)

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (MARK 10:45)

Jesus taught them that he would rule, but only after he suffered and died for our sins. Theologians sometimes use the technical phrase, "penal substitutionary atonement," to describe what Christ accomplished when he suffered and died for us on the cross. Wayne Grudem explains it this way:



Christ's death was "penal" in that he bore a penalty when He died. His death was also a "substitution" in that He was a substitute for us when He died [...][This] view is sometimes called the vicarious atonement. A vicar is someone who stands in the place of another or who represents another. Christ's death was therefore "vicarious" because He stood in our place and represented us. As our representative, he took the penalty that we deserve.¹⁰²

In his classic summary of the gospel, Paul taps into this same theme of substitutionary atonement that appears in Genesis and permeates the rest of the Bible:



For I delivered to you as of first importance what also I received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time...then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me. (1 COR. 15:3-8)

The good news of the gospel is that Christ's death on the cross has paid the penalty for our sins so that we can be forgiven. But there is even more good news! The cross is so powerful that it makes possible the restoration of the entire created world. After going into great detail in his letter to the Romans explaining how Christ's atoning death puts away our individual sins, Paul goes on to say that, "The *creation itself* will be set free from the bond-

age of decay” (ROM. 8:21). Because of the cross, he says, Christ is now reconciling *all things* to himself (COL. 1:20).

Simon Gathercole, in an important article demonstrating that there is no contradiction between the gospel preached in the gospels and the gospel preached by Paul, stresses the both/and nature of the cross: “Christ died ‘for all’ not only to atone for individuals’ transgression, but also to pronounce destruction on the old world and create a new one.”¹⁰³ In other words, as theologian Michael Allen puts it, “Salvation does reshape cultural practices [...] because God’s redemptive work gives newness to every facet of human life.”¹⁰⁴

So the King’s cross *both* forgives our sins *and* transforms our world. Theologian D.A. Carson explains these twin themes in the New Testament texts about the King’s cross as a broad and a narrow focus of the gospel. “The

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narrower focus draws you to Jesus—his incarnation, his death and resurrection, his session and reign.” “The broader focus sketches in the mighty dimensions of what Christ has secured.”¹⁰⁵

The good news of the gospel is that the King has pardoned us and welcomed us back into a kingdom family whose mission is bringing all of life under the King’s rule. Proclaiming the gospel means sharing with our friends the good news that Jesus can forgive and heal their guilt, shame, or self-hatred and he invites them to join him in healing the world.

Proclaiming the gospel means sharing with our friends the good news that Jesus can forgive and heal their guilt, shame, or self-hatred, and he invites them to join him in healing the world.

The Kingdom Must Be Proclaimed in Word and Deed

One of the places where the Church has often fallen into either/or thinking is the relationship of word and deed in gospel proclamation. One side stresses the importance of demonstrating the gospel with our lives and actions. This group loves a certain quote from St Francis: “Preach

the gospel whenever you can. If necessary, use words.” The other side stresses the important of explaining the gospel in plain, powerful speech.

Jesus did both. He talked about the gospel, and he demonstrated the gospel with his compassion for the sick and broken. Matthew captured both dimensions of the Lord’s both/and gospel ministry when he described our Lord’s ministry: “And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people” (MATT. 4:23). Jesus sent the disciples out to preach the gospel of the kingdom and heal the sick (LUKE 10:9). Jesus told a startled crowd who had just witnessed an exorcism, “If by the spirit of God I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God is among you” (MATT. 12:28). Jesus proclaimed the gospel in both word and deed.

The *Manila Manifesto*, written by dozens of evangelical scholars in 1989, affirms both/and thinking: “The authentic gospel must become visible in the transformed lives of men and women. As we proclaim the love of God we must be involved in loving service, as we preach the kingdom of God we must be committed to its demands of justice and peace.” The *Manifesto* continues, “Jesus not only proclaimed the kingdom of God, he also demonstrated its arrival by works of mercy and power. We are called today to a similar integration of words and deeds [...] The biblical gospel has inescapable social implications.”¹⁰⁶

The good news of the kingdom is both spoken and demonstrated. We proclaim the gospel when we tell the story of the gospel and invite our neighbor to live within it. We proclaim the gospel when we pray for the sick and when we cast out demonic spirits by the power of God. We proclaim the gospel when we practice mercy in the city.

Entering the Kingdom

It's not easy entering another kingdom. Shortly after the Berlin Wall fell, Sandi and I spent many hours standing in an airport in Bucharest, Romania, as customs officials debated whether or not they wanted to let us into their country. You can't just walk into another kingdom. You need a passport and a visa. The same is true with the kingdom of God. You can't just walk in. Jesus says you have to repent and believe. He explains the demands required by the kingdom in terms of his own cross:



If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? (MARK 8:34-36)

The gospel is free, but it is not easy. Repentance demands from us our entire life. We are kings and queens of our own little kingdoms. Repentance requires that I relinquish the throne that I have become so used to sit-



*Only the dead enter the kingdom of God
because only the dead can be born again.*

ting on and bow in surrender before my Rightful King. Repentance means, perhaps more than anything else, a terrifying loss of control, which is the essence of death. Only the dead enter the kingdom of God because only the dead can be born again.

What I'd Say To Markel

So what would I say to Markel? Not much at first. I understand now that I would need to spend considerable time with him to earn the right to be heard. Suppose Markel moved back into the neighborhood after he did

his time and brought his daughter to the pool one June night. Suppose that he became an urban swim dad and trusted me enough to share his story. His mother's boyfriend beat him with a bat and then did the same to her. Their only escape was running outside and hiding. He remembered coming home to a cold, empty house as a seven year old and finding nothing to eat. He admitted that was the first night he ever stole anything. One thing led to another, and he dropped out of high school. He couldn't help but feel a thrill the first time he held a gun and the first time he sold cocaine. He talked about the night his half-brother got gunned down in the projects. He pulled up his shirt and showed me the place where another of his mother's boyfriends cut him open with a steak knife. If he asked, "So, does your Jesus have anything he can do about this?" I might say something like this:



Markel, I have no idea what it feels like to be you. I won't pretend to. Life has not been fair to you. I can't tell you how sorry I am for the way so many have failed you and hurt you. I do know that Jesus knows what it is like to be unfairly beaten for no fault of his own. The Bible says that he endured a horrific beating that eventually killed him. Three days after his murder, Jesus rose from the dead. That proves to me that he really is God, and that I can trust what he says.

One of the things that Jesus said about his death sounds kind of strange the first time you hear it. He said that he had to die be-

cause of me. He had to die because of you as well. Here's how that works. Scripture teaches that we have all broken God's laws. We are all sinners. God's prison sentence for sins is death. We all are guilty and deserve spiritual death—an eternity separated from God—as a punishment for our sins. That's the bad news.

Now here is the good news. Jesus died for our sins. He took the death penalty for us. Our sins are forgiven. The penalty against God's justice has been fully paid.

But that is not all. The bible also teaches that Jesus' death on the cross has released into the world a healing power, a transforming energy, that is even now at work in the world making it a better place. Jesus calls this powerful, transforming, life-giving thing the kingdom of God.

One of the things he did when he was on earth was gather together a group of his followers and teach them how to carry this God-power into the world. Sometimes they do this by talking about Jesus, like I am doing now. Other times they do this by caring for people who are hurting. We call the community of sinners who follow Jesus the Church. The Church is where we learn how to give Jesus control of our lives. The Church is where we heal and grow. And the Church is where we find out how God wants us to help others.

This kingdom isn't for everyone, Markel. Actually, it is for everyone, but not everyone wants to become a part of it. Jesus says that we have to die to get in. What he means is that we have to be willing to stop controlling our own lives and give control to him.

So what do you think?

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