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Rethinking Urban Theology: A Critique for Moving Forward

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**RETHINKING URBAN THEOLOGY: A CRITIQUE FOR
MOVING FORWARD**

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Cory Wilson

abstract

The last 300 years have witnessed the worldwide urban population jump from just two percent in 1700 to fifty percent at the turn of the twenty-first century. The Christian community has sought to adapt and respond to this current trend in the form of developing an urban theology. This article seeks to provide what is intended to be a helpful critique of some aspects of urban theology. Specific attention will be given to three aspects of urban theology that are in need of critique: urbanization, the gospel and social justice, and biblical theology. Following an analysis of these three areas, a way forward will be offered in the conclusion.

The last 300 years have witnessed the worldwide urban population jump from just two percent in 1700 to fifty percent at the turn of the twenty-first century.¹ The explosion of urbanization has left—and continues to leave—numerous effects on societies throughout the world as governments, economies, and cultures scramble to adapt and respond to growing urban populations. Likewise, the Christian community has sought to adapt and respond to this current trend. This truth is

¹ David Clark, *Urban World Global City*: 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2003), 4.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2022], Art. 4 displayed in the rise of urban theology over recent decades and in the increased attention it has received throughout the academic community and the church today.

The aim of this article is to provide what is intended to be a helpful critique of some aspects of urban theology. Attention will be given to distortions that some aspects of urban theology make pertaining to three areas: urbanization, the gospel, and biblical theology. Following an analysis of these distortions, a way forward will be offered in the conclusion. The intention of this work is not to undermine the importance of the rise of urban theology, nor to diminish the significant role it is playing in calling the church to ministry in the city. It is also not meant to suggest that all urban theology writers make these mistakes—for the field is as diverse as the urban centers they write about. The goal is simply to point out some areas of weakness that appear to be prevalent in urban theology. Roger Greenway insightfully comments, “We cannot expect lives to be changed, city neighborhoods improved, and vital churches established if our labors spring from feeble, even distorted, theological roots.”² As these distortions are addressed, the hope is that a stronger and more biblically sound urban theology will remain—a theology that will receive the blessings of God for the transformation and restoration of the great urban centers of the world.

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distortions of urbanization in urban theology

There is no debating the massive people movements from the rural areas of the world to the cities in the past century. In one hundred years (1900–2000), the world’s urban population has swelled from eight percent to fifty percent. This number is expected to jump to nearly seventy percent by the year 2050.³ As urban theology writers have reflected on this trend, there is a failure to recognize overgeneralizations of urbanization. This failure, in turn, has led to two distortions that open the door for the neglect of certain peoples of the world in regard to biblical mission.

The first distortion deals with descriptions of the world population. Although it is true that half of the world currently resides in an urban setting, the fact remains that the other half of the world’s population does not. In putting particular focus on cities and not on people, half of the world’s population is excluded in the strategies of many urban mission writers. In the excitement to call

² Roger Greenway, *Cities: Missions’ New Frontier*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), 24.

³ World Urbanization Prospects: The 2007 Revision Population Database. [on-line] (accessed February 28, 2011); accessed from <http://esa.un.org/unup/>; Internet.

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the church to arms for the growing urban population, this truth has gone largely unnoticed by those blowing the trumpets. Raymond Bakke writes, “All the nations of the world are now within the shadow of the spire of Lutheran churches.”⁴ He adds, “The frontier of mission has shifted. It is no longer geographically distant. . . . Today, you go to the cities and you find the nations.”⁵ There is clearly truth to Bakke’s comments. The great cities of the world are filled with representatives from many nations. The difficulty, however, is that part of Bakke’s and other urban missiologists’ argument for a priority focus on the cities is because of the number of people living in the city. If that is the case, the same could be argued for the rural and village areas—since a near equal number of people worldwide reside there as they do in the cities.

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In addition to the failure to recognize the implications that half of the world continues to live outside of large cities, there is the failure to recognize the imbalance of urban growth numbers in some parts of the world when compared to other areas. Belgium stands at one end of the spectrum with 97 percent of its people living in towns or cities.⁶ Most countries in South America also boast high urban populations, as all but one maintains over 50 percent urban populations. Venezuela, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina all have populations in which over 80 percent live in the cities.⁷

Contrasted to these numbers are the population locations in many parts of Africa and Asia. In regard to southern Africa, eastern, south-central, and south-eastern Asia, David Clark writes, “Only a small percentage of their populations live in urban places and these regions include many of the world’s most rural areas. The village is the most common unit of settlement and towns and cities are the exceptions rather than the norm.”⁸ In addition, Clark goes on to state that less than 10 percent of the population in Burundi and Rwanda are urban dwellers, and less than 25 percent in Burkina Faso, Chad, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Guinea-Bissau, Malawi, and Niger are urban dwellers. The urban population of Sub-Saharan Africa stands at 37 percent.⁹ This stands in sharp contrast to urban population of the most developed regions of the world, which is currently at 75 percent.¹⁰

In light of the diversity in urban population percentages, it must be understood that although the process of urbanization can be found on all inhabited continents,

⁴ Harvie Conn, *The Urban Face of Mission: Ministering the Gospel in a Diverse and Changing World* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P & R Publishers, 2002), 39.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶ Clark, 23

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ World Urbanization Prospects.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2022], Art. 4 dominating urban centers are not representative of every region of the world. Therefore statements like, “The entire planet is becoming highly urbanized,”¹¹ appear premature. Half of the world’s population remains outside of the cities, so any effort to define the world population or mission strategy purely in urban terms neglects 50 percent of the world population. Furthermore, it must be questioned whether the projected rates of urbanization are realistically sustainable. Some once large urban cities are experiencing declines in population (Detroit declined 25% in the last decade). Someone has to grow crops to agriculturally sustain the world’s population. Someone has to harvest resources used in material production. Urbanization cannot logically continue indefinitely. There has to be a breaking point at some time. The question remains as to what that point is. The warning here is to resist allowing a sociological trend to overly influence the church’s theology of mission.

A second distortion and overgeneralization of urbanization that proponents use to argue for ministry in an urban context over that of rural contexts is the presence of social injustices and poverty. There is no denying that all urban contexts experience some degree of unfortunate social injustice and poverty. This is simply a reality of the Fall. In some cities, research shows that over half the population lives in slum or squatter communities.¹² The point here is not to lightly dismiss this grievous truth. However, the assumption, by some, appears to be that these problems only exist in urban contexts.¹³ The same ills of poverty, drug abuse, poor education, and broken families that plague many American urban contexts can just as easily be found in rural American settings. The extreme poverty found in the slums of many majority-world countries can likewise be seen in the nomadic people groups of the Fulani or Idakshak roaming the Sahel region of West Africa. The manifestation of these social ills is greater in the city only because of the higher concentration of people, not because they do not exist outside of the city. In some contexts, the presence of poverty can be greater outside of the city. Of the ten poorest and least developed countries in the world, all of which are in Africa, none have mega-urban centers.¹⁴ For the most part, the dwellers of capital cities such as Ouagadougou of Burkina Faso and Niamey of Niger are in better financial condition than those who continue to live in villages. In fact, many village families’ existence is dependant upon the resources acquired by family members

¹¹ Conn, *The Urban Face of Mission*, 30.

¹² Harvie Conn. *Planting and Growing Urban Churches: From Dream to Reality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1997), 163.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 150–163. and Charles Engen. *God So Loves the City: Seeking a Theology for Urban Mission* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1994), 195–219.

¹⁴ Nathaniel Cahners Hindman. “The 10 Poorest Countries in the World,” *Huffington Post* [on-line] (Oxford University-U.N., August 3, 2010, accessed February 28, 2011); http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/08/03/the-10-poorest-countries_n_668537.html#s122175&title=10_Sierra_Leone; Internet.

Wilson: Rethinking Urban Theology: A Critique for Moving Forward living in the cities. This is not to suggest that poverty in urban centers is identical to that of rural areas. The family or community structure that is present in many rural areas to help soften the bitterness of poverty is often not present in major urban centers. However, the fact remains that extreme poverty is not limited to urban centers.

The root of this distortion is, in part, due to a misunderstanding of the cause of poverty. Some argue that poverty is a result of social structures or those who are in power.¹⁵ Jayakumar Christian writes, “Poverty is the result of the many (the poor) becoming the captives of the god-complexes of the few (the nonpoor).” He adds, “Poverty is essentially an attempt by the nonpoor and the structures to make a person that God created from the dust of the ground (Gen 2:7) into dust again.”¹⁶ This may be the case in some places; however, the error and non-universality of this statement can be seen in once again considering the village dwellers of Burkina Faso and Niger. They do not sit in poverty because the nonpoor are holding them down. They sit in poverty because they dwell in a harsh land with few natural resources and little rain for crops and economies with very limited opportunity for jobs. Furthermore, Christian fails to consider the effects of the Fall and how poverty can be a natural result of living on a cursed earth that groans for restoration.

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Overgeneralizing urbanization and limiting the location of the poor to urban contexts brings neglect to the world’s rural population and the poor outside of urban contexts. It must be remembered that half of the world’s population and the world’s poorest people do not live in urban centers. Therefore, using population and poverty as sufficient reasons for focused urban ministry over and against rural ministry is not sufficient. Attention will now be directed toward urban theology and the gospel.

distortions of the gospel in urban theology

The second area of distortion to be considered is in relation to the gospel. Distortions of the gospel in some aspects of urban theology can be specifically seen in two areas: first, in an exclusive emphasis on the poor, and second, in a misunderstanding of justice. It must be stressed that not all urban writers make these distortions, yet they are distortions that are present among some.¹⁷

In regard to misunderstanding the gospel and its relationship to the poor, Viv Grigg provides an example of this distortion. In reflecting on Luke 4:18, Grigg

¹⁵ Engen, 27–52 and Conn, *The Urban Face of Mission*, 159–184.

¹⁶ Engen, 202–203.

¹⁷ Viv Grigg, *Cry of the Urban Poor* (Monrovia, CA: MARC, 1992) and Conn, *The Urban Face of Mission*, 159–196.

Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2022], Art. 4 writes, “Did he [Jesus] not with these words model the gospel as primarily good news for the poor? Did he not focus his ministry to the poor?”¹⁸ There are two difficulties with Grigg’s statement. The first is in regard to the full statement in which Jesus is quoted as saying in Luke 4:18. Jesus does state that He has come to preach the gospel to the poor, but He also states that He has come to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and set free those who are oppressed. Following Grigg’s line of argument that this passage means the gospel is primarily for the poor, then we must also say it is primarily for captives, the blind, and oppressed. The result would be a gospel message that is primarily intended for poor blind captives who are oppressed. Anyone outside of that category would be viewed as secondary in regard to gospel proclamation. This extreme interpretation is not what Grigg is arguing for, but it is the natural conclusion of his argument that the gospel is primarily for the urban poor. Even if Grigg’s conclusion was convincing, he fails to recognize that a call to focus primarily on the poorest would not lead one to the urban centers, but to the continent of Africa where, as previously mentioned, the world’s poorest and least-developed countries are located.

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The second difficulty with Grigg’s interpretation is that it is contrary to the very words of Christ and the remainder of the Scriptures. In the following chapter of Luke, Jesus proclaims, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). We see in these words that the gospel is for sinners—whether poor or rich. Walter L. Liefeld comments that “poor” throughout the Gospel of Luke “implies those who are utterly dependent upon God.”¹⁹ Therefore, “poor” in Luke 4:18 should not be limited to just the physically poor, but to the spiritually poor as well. It is possible that the physically poor can be more aware of their need for God than the wealthy are; however, that does not mean that the gospel is not for the wealthy as well. A failure to understand that the gospel is *primarily* for sinners—and not the poor—is to suggest that Christ came to this earth to suffer and die because of a consequence of sin (physical poverty), and not actual sin itself (spiritual poverty).

A second distortion concerning the gospel is equating social justice with the gospel itself—instead of seeing it as an implication of the gospel. Clinton Stockwell declares that “Justice is part of the gospel.”²⁰ Social justice should not be understood as a core part of the gospel, but as an overflow or implication of the gospel. The root of this distortion seems to lie in perceiving wealth and imperfect

¹⁸ Conn, *Planting and Growing*, 151.

¹⁹ Walter L. Liefeld. “Luke,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: With the New International Version of the Holy Bible*, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 891.

²⁰ Conn, *The Urban Face of Mission*, 159.

Wilson: Rethinking Urban Theology: A Critique for Moving Forward social structures as sin itself. Grigg laments that missionaries have not called the rich to repentance for their wealth, yet he never suggests the poor have any need of repentance.²¹ In Stockwell's chapter on "The Church and Justice in Crisis," he never suggests that the root of injustice lies within sinful hearts, rich or poor. Instead he sees the problem as "social structures that render people poor and powerless," and suggests they be replaced with "new structures that model justice with compassion."²² The difficulty with this misplacement of sin is that it fails to understand the root of the problem. Wealth and social structures can be greatly used for the furthering of the gospel and the kingdom of God, or for its delay and hindrance. The problem is not wealth or social structures, but rebellious hearts that commit treason against their Creator. In Romans, Paul refers to this treason as sin, and it is this sin that the message of the gospel seeks to conquer. In summarizing the core of the message he preached, Paul described the gospel as the fact that

52 "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3-4). The gospel is a message. It is a message of good news that at its very core, deals with the root of all problems—sin. It ceases to be good news when the justification of the unrighteous is stripped from its core. The heart of the gospel is not the social transformation of cities, but the eradication of sin. The result of this eradication is the restoration of God's creation, which includes the establishment of social justice, not only in the cities, but also to the ends of the earth. In this way justice is not "part of the gospel,"²³ but a natural implication of the gospel. Transformed hearts will result in transformed structures that will lead to transformed cities.

To say the gospel is primarily for the poor distorts the gospel and the ultimate purpose for the suffering and death of Jesus. Likewise, to equate social justice as the gospel is to confuse the core function of the gospel with the implications and fruit of the gospel. The place of urban theology in regard to biblical theology will now be considered.

distortions of biblical theology in urban theology

Distortions in regard to biblical theology are equally prevalent in urban theology. The distortions in relation to biblical theology center on a presumed bias of Scripture toward the city. As previously mentioned, with the development of urbanization came the development of urban theology. The history of this

²¹ Ibid., *Planting and Growing*, 160.

²² Ibid., *The Urban Face of Mission*, 183.

²³ Ibid., 159.

However, what must be recognized is that urban theology arose out of the context of the process of urbanization. In response to masses of people moving to the cities of the world, some in the Christian community sought to evaluate the trend from a biblical perspective. The result of this reflection has not always been sound biblical interpretation. Greenway expresses this when he writes,

As evangelical churches and mission organizations awaken to the challenges of a rapidly expanding urban world, there is the danger that the urgency of the task will cause them to neglect biblical foundations. The needs in the city are so many and so pressing that we are tempted to move in multiple directions without pausing to take our theological bearings. Urban mission has suffered a great deal from such negligence in the past.²⁵

When the Christian community finds itself responding to trends instead of setting them, the tendency to manipulate the biblical text to justify certain trends is greatly increased. This appears to be the case for some urban missiologists in regard to the biblical understanding of the city.

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As urbanization has progressed, there is a sense of need to biblically justify ministry to the city. For some, the simple fact that millions of unregenerate people live in the city without the gospel appears at times to be an insufficient argument. Therefore, some appear compelled to argue that the Scriptures have a specific bias toward the city. Furthermore, they argue Jesus himself was biased toward the city. This results in arguments that hinder the case for urban theology rather than advancing it.

Some argue that Jesus visited Jerusalem as many as five times, and therefore His ministry had an urban focus.²⁶ This argument ignores the fact that the bulk of Jesus' ministry was in the region of Galilee, not in the major city of Jerusalem. Another argument for a theology for the city is that the word "city" occurs 1,090 in the Old Testament.²⁷ It is not the number of uses of certain words that is significant, but what is said about those words and the context in which they are written. At times God's people are ordered to flee the city because of its sinfulness, while at other times they are told to seek the peace of the city. Often references to the city are neutral, meaning the city is simply the location of a people or the destination of those traveling. The simple fact the word "city" is used over 1,000 times does not in itself constitute a scriptural bias toward the city.

²⁴ Greenway, 9–59 and Conn, *Planting and Growing*, 25–34.

²⁵ Greenway, 24.

²⁶ Conn, *The Urban Face of Mission*, 163 and David Claerbaut. *Urban Ministry in a New Millennium*. Updated ed. (Waynesboro, GA: World Vision, 2005), 5.

²⁷ Conn, *The Urban Face of Mission*, 33.

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A third example of poor biblical support of a bias toward the city in the Scriptures uses the book of Jonah as foundation. David Claerbaut sites Jonah's call of repentance to the great city of Nineveh as support of urban bias in Scripture. His argument fails to recognize two points. The first is that the greater significance of Jonah's preaching to Nineveh was not that it was a great city, but that it was filled with over 120,000 Gentiles and not Jews. God was teaching Israel that He was not their God alone, but the God of all nations. A second difficulty is that God constantly called the nation of Israel to repentance throughout the Old Testament, though they dwelt in cities and the rural areas. The point is that God calls all to repentance—Israelites, Gentiles, city dwellers, and rural dwellers. Simply providing an example of an instance of God calling a city to repentance does not demand a scriptural bias toward the city.

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A final example of a distortion of biblical theology present in urban theology is the argument that God has commanded urban ministry in the cultural mandate. Greenway suggests that if the Fall had not occurred, the world “would most certainly have been an urban world,” and that the cultural mandate “required city building.”²⁸ However, the cultural mandate to “fill the earth” seems to go contrary to staying in a central location to build a city. The cultural mandate should be understood as God's desire to fill every corner of His creation with those who serve and obey Him,²⁹ not just to build grand urban centers throughout the world.

The combination of these distortions helps show that urban theology cannot exist *as* biblical theology. It is insufficient to say that the thrust of biblical theology is urban. Urban theology must be understood as an aspect of biblical theology, not the central theme of it. The reality is that a robust urban theology does not need a scriptural bias toward the city. The fact that there are billions of unregenerate people, many who have never heard the gospel, provides a sufficient foundation for an urgent call to urban mission. Understanding the proper place of biblical theology and urban theology serves to strengthen both.

conclusion

The Scriptures do have a redemptive bias. It is not to the city, but to the nations. This is the underlying theme of the Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation.³⁰ It is

²⁸ Greenway, 26.

²⁹ Cory Wilson. “The Great Commission as Creational Restorative Covenant.” *Global Missiology English* 1, no. 7 [on-line] (October 2010, accessed April 14, 2011); available from <http://ojs.globalmissiology.org/index.php/english/article/view/405>; Internet.

³⁰ Walter Kaiser. *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000); John Piper. *Let the Nations Be Glad!: The Supremacy of God in Missions*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003); and Christopher Wright. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

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from the seed of Abraham that all the peoples of the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:1–3). When this Seed is born, He is declared a light of revelation to the nations (Luke 2:32). In John’s great vision of heaven he sees not representatives of all the cities, but of all the nations (Rev 7:9). It is at this point that the place of the city is better understood. Urban areas are important and need mission focus because they are where millions and millions of people from the nations live and dwell, not because of the simple fact that they are cities. God’s love is not for the city itself, but for the nations dwelling in the city. The city to come is not glorious because it is a city. It is glorious because the King reigns there and His bride lives there. Reaching the city is a means to an end. A failure to recognize the proper place of the city can lead to a neglect of the nations that are not in the city. Many will argue that if you simply reach the cities, you will reach all other areas. This is not necessarily true. In West Africa, missionaries have labored long and hard in the cities for well over a century, yet the interior of West Africa remains largely untouched with the gospel. Simply having churches in the cities will not reach the nations. They must be churches with an outward focus of reaching the nations. As Roland Allen comments, “It is not enough for the church to be established in a place where many are coming and going unless the people that come and go not only learn the Gospel, but also learn it in such a way that they can propagate it.”³¹ What is needed is not a narrow focus on the cities, but a commitment to the nations—the nations that dwell in urban contexts and those that dwell in rural contexts, those that are rich, and those that are poor.

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³¹ Roland Allen. *Missionary Methods: St. Paul’s or Ours?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 13.

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