



GOD IN THE CITY

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When police broke into an apartment in Sydney in January 2008 and found the decomposed body of 61-year-old Jorge Coloma¹, there was much community discussion of how his absence could have gone unnoticed for over a year. He had died from natural causes. No one noticed his absence; not his family, not his neighbours, not government authorities. Even 12 months' worth of mail and unpaid bills falling out of the mailbox did not lead anyone to check his apartment or call the police. It took a year before neighbours felt that something was wrong. Questions were asked: why had authorities not done something? Wasn't there one family member that had missed him?

Neighbours asked themselves why they hadn't spoken up sooner. Jorge's story and many others like it are the dark side of city life. But there is another side.

According to the Bible, the city is not an evil aberration, a degenerate, lesser form of human habitation. Rather, it is a form of human settlement that shares one feature with all creation—it is populated with less than perfect people. In fact, rather than being a lesser form of settlement, God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah (29:5-7), and commended the Israelites who had survived the destruction of Jerusalem and been exiled to Babylon, to flourish within and contribute to the life of the city.

Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ... 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.

This is not the only reference to cities in the Bible; it also depicts the future, new

Jerusalem, the restored and redeemed dwelling place of God and his people as a city. Revelation 21:2 describes it as '... the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband'.

When we decided to produce an edition of *Case* with the theme 'City Life' we quickly realised just how many topics the theme can generate. But our aim was to have a sense of unity in the contributions. So what unifies this edition of *Case*? While the sub-topics are diverse,

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all contributors seek to apply biblical theology to some aspect of city life and to tease out what this might mean for Christians living in cities. Let me introduce the sub-themes covered, then offer my own comments on one area in which I have a strong interest.

The City as Babel

Cities can house and hide great tragedies, such as that of Jorge Coloma. But cities are also places of rich culture and learning, places where ideas are exchanged and people's lives are enriched and changed. Cities are places where the nations of the world rub against one another. Approximately 50 per cent of the world's population lives in cities and future growth is predicted to be almost entirely in cities. In developed countries it is even higher, with 75 per cent of Americans living in cities. In this issue of *Case*, Mike Thompson offers an historical insight into one of the world's great cities—New York, a city that has fascinated and drawn people from all points of the globe. In considering New

York, he applies the biblical image of Babel to consider and characterise its diversity, its aesthetic, its contrasts of public and private life and indeed its own self-defined glory. This is a place, Mike Thompson suggests, that celebrates 'democratic tolerance and pluralism' as among its greatest virtues.

The plurality of cities and their ability to attract humanity is also one of the reasons that cities have always been seen as strategic militarily, in terms of trade and also in terms of the sharing and generation of ideas and learning.

Keller suggests that if you capture the city with the gospel you capture the nation². The city, he points out, is a strategic place to build gospel ministry, a place where the world comes to you. As such, cities are important places where Christians have numerous opportunities to preach and share the Word, serve the sick and needy, train and equip others for life and ministry, raise a family, and be part of the delivery of God's grace to lost people.

Anonymity in the city

While God doesn't hide from us or want us to hide from one another, the city can be a lonely and isolated place. It can be a place where the homeless, the abused, the disabled and the elderly can easily become forgotten and invisible. There is much talk about the impact of technology on human activity, including new ways to connect or 'wire' communities. But while technology is changing the way we spend our time, where we spend it, and how we communicate with one another, the

need for human contact remains. Roberta Kwan explores this theme. Using the concept of anonymity, she seeks to understand theologically why some people and places can become almost invisible in the city. In the city we can fear the stranger, seek to limit human interaction and at times relish the possibility of being anonymous. And yet, this is not the way God meant it to be. Our desire should be to know one another. She comments, 'It is inbuilt into the human race as part of our image-bearing of our relational Creator and because of our longings for the perfections of the heavenly Jerusalem.' Furthermore, the Christian community should be one where people are known and accountable to one another.

Justice in the city

John McClean and Mark Glanville explore the theme of justice in the city. They consider the seeming anomaly that while cities are places of great wealth and relatively high standards of living, they are also places of extreme urban poverty. A basic question frames their essay: 'Who cares for the urban

with expectation of the new creation, we anticipate and strive '... now in the direction of the kingdom', following Jesus in word and deed.

Work and rest in the city

Some would characterise life as made up of three major components: work, rest and sleep. While we could contest this simple classification, there is no doubt that attaining a balance between work and the rest of life, or even a right attitude to work, is closely related to people's sense of happiness and wellbeing. Tim Chester explores the topic of having a work-life balance in the city, drawing heavily on his recent book on the topic. The Bible, he points out, says that both rest and work are good. But in the city we see demonstrated a constant playing out of two competing ethics, a 'work-centred' ethic versus a 'leisure-centred' ethic, and a frenetic busyness. Drawing on the Scriptures, Chester considers some of the many reasons that we give for being too busy. Essentially, he argues that they are all based on a failure to believe the truth about God and trust him.

The importance of planning and architecture in the city

A further theme we wanted to explore is the importance of planning, and the careful design and use of space. How is the planning and arrangement of our cities, communities and homes related to the way people live in these physical spaces? Can we facilitate—or limit—human interaction in the city through our planning and architecture? My brief comments here seek to offer a partial insight into this important topic.

In his interesting new book *Till We Have Built Jerusalem*,³ Professor Philip Bess explores arguments in favour of traditional architecture and urbanism.

He contends in favour of their relationship to 'human flourishing' and the culture of the towns and cities that sustains them. To do so, he draws on a background in architecture, his Catholic Christian faith and philosophical thought to outline his thesis that:

... the city is not simply a marketplace, not simply a 'culture center' or entertainment zone, and not simply an aesthetic object. The city is all of these, but above all [*it is*] the locus of the best life for human beings, including the life of specific moral and intellectual virtues.⁴

One of the most challenging chapters explores the tension between the human need for private and public space: the human tendency to sometimes want to be alone and on other occasions to be with other people. Bess argues for the importance of public space and stresses that physical and spatial arrangements matter in cities and neighbourhoods. As well, he cites the impact of the automobile on planning and how, in some cities, it has increasingly shaped the sprawling metropolis, dissected communities and provided a means for one's place of domicile and place of work to be well separated; each with negative consequences for community. He also explores the preoccupation in developed nations to increase the size of homes, increase the number of bathrooms, move the more limited outdoor space from the front to the rear and to virtually discard the traditional site of much community interaction, the front porch.

Bigger and more luxurious bedrooms and bathrooms seem to me just one physical manifestation of that shrinkage of the public realm happening reciprocally and in tandem with America's true growth industry, the care and tending of the autonomous self ... our culture's turn from the civic to the private.⁵

These ideas raise many questions for me which I have explored on the CASE blog⁶. Is such a shift inevitable? What impact does it have on individual lives

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poor?' They issue a challenge to all churches that the word 'justice' is not to be avoided. Using the 10 commandments to demonstrate how God gave Israel a blueprint for a world where people could flourish, the authors argue that God's goal for all creation is to live and thrive. This, they argue, was the foundation upon which Israel was to build '... a positive ethic of mutual responsibility towards the poor'; one which was often overlooked and almost forgotten. They suggest that God's plan for Israel is applicable to all who are disciples of Christ. We do not seek perfection, or even hope to see all injustice removed in this world, but

and the facilitation of community building? How could it impact on our desire to share the gospel with others? Does it have significance for the way we 'do' church?

By way of illustration let me share how such thinking has influenced one project which, as Master of New College at the University of New South Wales, has been my responsibility. New College is a residential college with a mission 'founded on Christian faith and values' that is committed to building community life on a secular university campus. As an extension of this mission we opened a new residential community for 316 postgraduates in January 2009. This project has been a significant challenge in trying to marry our goals with those of the university. The university's starting point was that postgraduates want to lead independent lives, have their own private space and be free to limit human interaction in accordance with their desire to study hard. Our starting point was that in accordance with the design of their

meet such needs while facilitating community. In particular, how were we to achieve the right balance of public and private space? The ensuing design brief can be read elsewhere⁷, but in essence it sought to provide adequate but not excessive private space balanced by many attractive, varied, functional and inviting public spaces—spaces for community building programs and catalysts for the building of relationships. The design brief challenged the architects to create a design that increased the visibility of public space and made it easy for serendipitous human contact.

The outcome is a beautiful building that is facilitating community and allowing us to build community programs, strong pastoral care and effective Christian ministry.

As Bess has stressed, good design does not cause happiness. But it can be an 'occasion for and manifestation' of it. Furthermore, good design doesn't cause community to occur, but it can be an expression of community and also foster it.⁸ The formation of rich, caring and open communities will depend on the commitment of people to build relationships

with each other; to spend time together, to share their lives and their faith in word and deed. As such, for Christians, the way we plan our homes, our church buildings, the decisions we make about where we live and our involvement as citizens should demonstrate that we base our understanding of the spaces we inhabit on our biblical understanding of the purposes of God for our lives.

What are some implications of this issue of *Case for Christian apologetics, witness and ministry*?

The various authors of the essays in this edition of *Case* draw many implications for those of us who dwell in cities. Some of these implications are not restricted to city dwellers, but they have special significance for those who do live in cities. We have argued for a right understanding of the place of city life as part of God's redemptive plan for his creation, and how this might affect the way we view cities and our lives within them. The articles demonstrate how the

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Scriptures can help to inform how we live, plan and build our cities, engage with our communities, and model and share our faith with other city dwellers. In living our, at times, hectic existence of the city, we are to seek to adopt an ethic that is biblically informed and which is consistent across all realms of life including work, rest, church, study, family and all relationships. Our lives in the city will be enriched if they are centred on God. As Tim Chester reminds us, our faith in God and his truth '...will set us free to serve others, to glorify God and to enjoy his rest'.

I hope you enjoy this edition of *Case*. ©

ENDNOTES

- 1 Baker, Jordan (2008). 'Man was dead a year - but no one noticed'. In *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 10th January. www.smh.com.au/news/national/man-dead-a-year-but-no-one-noticed/2008/01/09/1199554742670.html
- 2 Keller, Tim (2002). A biblical theology of the city. In *Evangelical Now*, July. www.e-n.org.uk/p-1869-A-biblical-theology-of-the-city.htm
- 3 Bess, Philip (2006). *Till We Have Built Jerusalem: Architecture, Urbanism, and the Sacred*. Washington DC: Intercollegiate Studies Institute.
- 4 Ibid, p29.
- 5 Ibid, p34.
- 6 Cairney, Trevor (2009). *City Living, Architecture and the Gospel*. <http://andjustincase.blogspot.com/2009/02/city-living-architecture-and-gospel.html>
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Op cit, Bess (2006), p39.

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Creator, they are people who are made to live in relationship with other people.

The 'New College Village', as it has been called, was conceived to try to provide a building that seeks to meet the perceived needs of today's students for quality space, convenience and service, while not retreating from our mission to the people on the UNSW campus. The challenge has been how to