

Christians and urbanists do have some common ground

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=6111>

There are several websites that I go to each day to look for articles on issues that interest me. One of those is newgeography.com, which focuses primarily on city planning and demographics issues.

It is rare to see an article on any of the websites that addresses religion, and especially Christianity, but several weeks ago one appeared entitled, “Religion and the City,” by Aaron M. Renn, who typically writes about urban issues.

The article started with a verse from the book of Jeremiah, which said, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf; for in its welfare you will have welfare.”(29:7)

This verse, when read alone, might be interpreted to mean that God wants us to live in cities, but the context of the verse actually reflects the fact the God had sent the Israelites into captivity in Babylon because of their disobedience.

In fact, in the chapter prior to this verse, a false prophet had promised the Israelites that they would soon be going home, but Jeremiah heard from God who told him that not only were they not going to get their freedom, but that their captivity was going to be much worse than they thought. So what God was really saying to the Israelites in this verse was, you might as well make the best of it in Babylon, because you’re going to be there for a very long time.

Being sent to the city of Babylon was a punishment, not a reward. Later, in chapter 30, God promises to deliver them from their captivity in Babylon and to return them to Israel.

Regarding his article, there were things that I agreed with and disagreed with. Beginning with my disagreements, he said that “Christianity was originally an urban religion,” yet the Gospel was spread by the Apostles and disciples as they traveled, as well as in the cities they visited. The Gospel was probably given to as many as or maybe even more people in villages and rural areas than in larger cities like Rome.

He said that “Christianity has always had a bit of a problem with cities, with their licentious ways, anonymity, and the little bit of Babylon and Sodom they all contain”. In reality, Christians are troubled by the sin they find in all places, not just cities. There is nothing inherently bad about cities.

He wrote that the “religious in the United States are often associated with the political right and conservative stances on social issues – just the type of people who don’t like cities or city dwellers much, and vice versa.”

While it is true that the religious are typically conservative and on the political right, to say that they don't like cities or city dwellers creates a myth and stereotypes Christians with an unfair and decidedly untrue brand. There are millions of Christians who live in cities and communities all across this nation, and who are fighting desperately to keep their churches in their cities. I am among them, having focused many articles over the years to the negative impact that urban planners have made on the church's ability to maintain a presence in cities.

Now for my points of agreement with Mr. Renn.

His next paragraph in the article is a statement of fact, in my opinion: "Yet urbanists should take religion much more seriously than they often do. That's because it plays a much bigger role in the city and civic health than currently believed, and because many urban congregations have mastered the art of outreach and conversion in a way that transit and density advocates can only dream about."

He also wrote that "they (urbanists) are pushing transit, density, sustainability, etc. largely based on a belief that these are self-evidently correct policies. I find that often their ability to sell them to people who are skeptical or come from a different worldview is poor. When people don't sign on to the latest carbon reduction scheme, rather than blaming a bad sales job, the blame is almost always put on the people rejecting it, such as by calling them idiots, intellectually dishonest, skills for corporations, or "deniers". I'm sure there are some of these types out there, but I believe the vast bulk of people don't fall into these categories."

Well said. Religious people, including Christians, are very intelligent people, and because they are culturally discerning in what they hear, they seek truth in all things, not just their religion. Truth be known, they probably want many of the same things that urbanists do; they simply disagree the use of bad science or unconstitutional methods to achieve them.

Renn's article included a link to a presentation that is worth listening to by Rev. Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City regarding evangelism and the church's role in cities. More on that next week.

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