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CITY OF GOD: IDEAL CITY

Utopia is a good place that is no place.

(Sargisson & Sargent, 2004: xiii)

The River of the City of God

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- DANCING INTO CITY TRANSFORMATION AT VICTORY CHRISTIAN CENTRE -

A leader from the 'Toronto blessing' preaches in a recently built Pentecostal auditorium for 2,500. Up front is a banner 'There is a stream that makes glad the city of God...' linking the work of the Spirit with the nature of the city. As we worship with a song of those words, women with banners dance around the auditorium. The whole gathering is laughing, singing, rejoicing!

*Down the mountains the river flows
And brings refreshing wherever it goes ...
The river of God sets my feet adancing,
The river of God fills my heart with cheer,
The river of God fills my heart with laughter,
And we rejoice for the river is here.*

In speaking of Transforming Revival in Auckland, there has been a presumption of a better future, a spectrum of end goals that must be determined if transforming action is to be effective.

1 A recent revival movement from Canada, which a number of New Zealand leaders visited, returning with powerful impact on their churches. Other charismatic leaders publicly rejected it as extreme. It lacked an underlying teaching base for sustainable multiplication in New Zealand (Poloma, 1997).

Pentecostalism is a dancing religion. The above song captures its soul. It leads into the complex theological grid that meshes the visionary themes of the Spirit of God with the city of God. Other traditions describe it as a theology of the prevenient work of the Holy Spirit.² Revelations 22 interprets the underlying nature of the Spirit as the life-giving water of the ideal city of God.

The intersection of these two themes begins with a tantalising statement in the liturgical procession of Psalm 46, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God” (Ps 46:4). Tantalising, for it does not make known what that river is — Jerusalem of the day had no river.

A subsequent vision in Ezekiel (47:1-12) describes the river flowing from the temple. The stream begins in the inner temple and becomes a river that flows down to purify the Dead Sea, sustaining an abundance of life, indicating wonderful renewing power. Fruit trees will grow along the banks of the river, their unfailing leaves will become healing. The apostle John alludes to these verses in his vision of the Holy City, adding that these bring healing “to the nations” (Rev 22: 1, 2).

The theme grows in grandeur through the teaching of Jesus about streams of living water (John 7:38). It becomes the centre of attention in the great picture of that future city of God in Revelations. Jesus gives us a specific interpretative key as to what this meant when he (or the apostle John as interpreter) tells us, “By this he meant the Holy Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive” (John 7:39).

60 | This Spirit creates eternal life. It is this life that brings socio-economic-political life to the nations. The Spirit is the stream that brings life to the city of God. That stream-filled city is used in the Scriptures and has been used throughout history as a model against which the good city of each generation has been evaluated.

Thus, at the centre of the life of the city of Auckland is the sustaining Spirit of God. This is true, whether its citizens acknowledge the Holy Spirit or not. Revival, giving greater place to the Spirit’s work, invoking his presence, ought to open up life-giving processes.

The extent to which that Spirit is free to bring life to the city can be evaluated³ by contrasting the nature of its present urban realities with the ideal city of God.

The City of God: The Future Theme

What is the nature of that ideal city of God? With simple attention to the first chapters of the book of Genesis,⁴ we can predict today’s cities and the nature of those cities. For

2 In *Gaudium et Spes*, Vatican II’s ‘Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World’, this wider understanding of mission is expounded pneumatologically rather than Christologically to a world in which God’s salvation has already been operative secretly through his Spirit. ‘This may, by the grace of God, issue in a more humane world.... the real author of this humanised history is the Holy Spirit’ (Bosch, 1991: 391).

3 Measurable indicators can be derived from the thirty-five characteristics within seven theological themes in this chapter.

4 A more comprehensive theology of the city of God, covering the whole gamut of the Scriptures, based on the over 2000 references to cities in the Scriptures could be developed, but while it would refine the themes of Genesis 1 and Rev 21,22, it would not greatly affect their broad brushstrokes.

cities *grow out* of the collective nature of humankind. That human nature reflects the very nature of God, described thirty-five times in the Mosaic or priestly account of Genesis 1. Cities also *grow towards* the nature of God's city as expressed in the apocalyptic visions of Revelations.⁵ For humanity, created in the image of God, projects God's nature into its communal structures. This defines an eternal basis for ideals for the transformation of a city, a vision of the "good" city. From Augustine's *City of God* (Dyson, 1998), to Ellul's *The Meaning of the City* (1997)⁶, the theme of the city of God has always been one of viewing the future, defining the Christian dream and its utopias.

The (Jahwist)⁷ narratives in Genesis 4 and 11 complement these optimistic themes of a city of God derived from the nature of God in the priestly account in Genesis 1, with a more sombre perspective on the city as a reflection of fallen humanity, for these first cities are built in rebellion against God. Cain, cursed to be a wanderer by God, builds a city, in defiance, for the security of his new-born child.⁸ The descendants of his line later build Babel, a city where humankind is determined to reach God by their own patterns, to make a name for themselves, a city which God must step in to destroy. Redemption history has often been described as the history of struggle between these two cities, the city of humanity and the city of God.

The Scriptures continue this saga of two cities into Revelation. The two cities become symbolised by Jerusalem, the city of shalom, where God has set his presence and Babylon, the city of slavery, of oppression, the city against God.⁹ The outcome is of the city of God triumphing, after the violent overthrow of Babylon by God himself (Rev 18). Then the bride of Christ, which is the city of God, is fully revealed in all its glory (Rev 21).

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Hermeneutical Background

Using Genesis 1 to understand a position within the biblical tradition in order to deal with modern cities involves some hermeneutic problems. Yet these philosophic foundations from Genesis 1-11 are useful as a conversational framework for a multifaceted urban Christianity because of their acceptability across the theological spectrum. Whatever hermeneutic perspective one has of Genesis: literalists of fundamentalist background, or those Evangelicals committed to the inspiration of the

5 This chapter has developed from twelve years of reflection on the concept of Harvey Conn's *Genesis as an Urban Prologue* (1992). He queries whether Genesis was intended as a historical corrective to the literary traditions of mythic creation commonly known in the ancient world, where the city was the estate of the city-god. Nature is not deified and God is not urbanised into the god of a locality, but is seen as the cosmic sovereign with the whole of creation as his house-city.

6 I suggest this as the only fully comprehensive biblical theology of the city to date.

7 While recognizing the dramatic difference in style of Genesis 1 to subsequent chapters and the common acceptance of the J-P documentary hypothesis, Evangelicals generally remain skeptical of any theory that denies the traditional understanding of Moses as primary author of the Babylonian traditions (Hamilton, 1990:11-38).

8 "Cain has built a city. For God's Eden he substitutes his own, for the goal given to his life by God, he substitutes a goal chosen by himself - just as he substituted his own security for God's" (Ellul, 1997:5).

9 This becomes central to Robert Linthicum's urban theology, *City of God, City of Satan* (1991a) and underlies much Pentecostal spiritual warfare thinking.

canon but recognising the humanness of its formation, to those who view these early chapters as allegorical; there is universal affirmation of the metanarratives portrayed.

Regardless of terminology — whether myth, history, saga — the canonical shape of Genesis serves the community of faith and practice as a truthful witness to God’s activity on its behalf..’ (Childs, 1979:158).¹⁰

Independent of our understanding of the sources or form of these passages, I would argue that to thus identify the primary philosophies inherent in the compressed symbols of Genesis 1 and track them through the Scriptures as a basis for present faith, is a normative manner of interpretative method. It is in line with the philosophic nature of the symbols in the source(s).

God of Creation

God of Time: Urban Development

“*In the beginning...*” defines a sense of time and process (for beginnings imply endings), as the opening statement in Genesis 1. It defines a directional historical process in contrast to Hinduistic or animistic thought, which are essentially cyclic, fate-defined or non-linear. Abraham Heschel describes the Hebrew faith “as a religion of time aiming at the sanctification of time” (1965(59):216). The biblical city will have a sense of time. The *fruitfulness* of Genesis 1 and multiplication of life indicate a process of growth and are foundational to themes of *urban development*. Without beginning there is no time and hence no development. The biblical idea of *rest* at the end of the chapter, indicates a seasonal process rather than a modernist perspective on purely linear growth, or an Eastern perspective on cyclic time. The periodic emergence of *new life forms and structures* in the Genesis account indicate the periodic quantum leaps of new growth which are woven into all life forms.

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God of Creation: Cities of Creativity

“*In the beginning God created,*” defines his subsequent rights to rule.¹¹ His creative activity defines ownership and authority. The prior rights, the beginnings, are matched at the end of the canon with final rights, the eternal. While that reign, that Kingdom, is first seen in a garden in Genesis, it is revealed in full in the final city of God of Revelation.

The trinity is here represented. Before the earth was formed, when all things were non-existent, *formless and void* (desert and wasteland),¹² and one could hear a pin drop in the

10 I am working from within an evangelical canonical perspective, that affirms a commitment to the superintending work of God in the process of formation hence the authority of these Scriptures. However I also recognise the human elements in the literary genre of the Genesis 1-11 sagas (cf. Westermann, 1980) and the Mesopotamian-style written accounts as debated in historical-critical research from the rise of the documentary thesis and its debates (Albright, 1940; North, 1986; Noth, 1957/1981; Van Seters, 1983, 1999; von Rad, 1962; Wellhausen, 1885).

11 There is grammatical debate over whether this should read, “in the beginning, when..”, indicating the existence of matter before the creation of the heavens and the earth. Brevard Childs representing the consensus, concludes, ‘we have seen the effort of the priestly writer to emphasize the absolute transcendence of God over the material’ (1960:32). This is in line with Isa 45:18, “Yaweh... did not create it [the earth] a chaos”.

12 See discussion in Hamilton on the translation of these words (1990: 108-9).

eternal silence, *the Spirit (rúah = breath of God) hovered¹³ over the waters.*

The Spirit's presence pre-creation, as if brooding¹⁴ over the birth and superintending (energising, giving life and vitality to (Hamilton, 1990:114)) creation, lends credence to the importance of the work of Spirit-filled believers in creating the city. If they are filled by this Spirit, that brooding and superintending of creation will be inherent in their being.

In the beginning God *created...* But this creation is only in this first instance of creation of light. "Everything else is created, or emerges in Genesis 1 by *fiat* plus some subsequent activity that is divinely instigated" (Hamilton, 1990:119). "God *made* the expanse and *gathered* the waters..." He speaks, then works to *separate* light from darkness, water from water.

In the beginning God *created...* This was the work of that Spirit, as in Job 33:4 "*The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life*", an ongoing work of creation, as Jesus says, "my Father is working still" (John 5:17).

Humankind, in his image, reflects that capacity to create something out of nothing, out of *desert* and *darkness*. Or, failing that, something out of something. Import-substitution is a theory that describes the heart of growth of cities. Cities that can innovatively copy and improve on items they import, then re-export them, are cities that will grow economically (Jacobs, 1984). For example, Silicon Valley lives off the creation of computer chips and their derivative products. A city filled with the Spirit will be a city of such creativity.

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God the Communicator: Cities as Centres of Media and Learning

Father, Spirit and then the Word. For in the silence, suddenly there is a voice! Or as the physicists describe it, a perturbation creating waves in nothingness, leading in less than an instant to the big bang of an exploding, expansive universe. Immediately there is life and action simply by the voice. "*And God said...*", "*and God said...*" (vv. 3, 6, 9, 14, 20, 24, 26) — a recurrent voice, creating phrase by phrase, an ongoing creative process.

These eight specific commands, calling all things into being, leave no room for notions of a universe that is self-existent, or struggled for, or random, or a divine emanation (Kidner, 1967:46).

The derived emphases, the foci on the presence of the incarnate Word, the church and the preached Word of God as source of creation of the city is inherent in these first verses of Scripture. For any city where the whole counsel of God is preached in every nook and cranny, will ideally become a creative and structured city.

And God said... God is also a communicating God. He is always speaking. The universe reverberates with his life-giving words and that conversation involves the Holy Spirit, who in turn continues within us, as a speaking being, speaking what is heard from Father and Son, speaking of the future, guiding into truth (John 16:12-15).

13 "Interestingly, in the Ugaritic texts, this verb is always associated with eagles... suggests the meaning "soar" (Hamilton, 1990:115).

14 '*Alateaba*' (hovering) speaks of the fluttering of the wings of a brooding bird, portraying both protection and provision for its young (See Deut 32:11, Isa 31:5) (Villafañe, 1993b: 182).

All humanity in their image seeks to communicate so cities become the centre of the television channels, the Internet, the radio. Even when perverted, city dwellers still possess this inherent nature that reflects this communicating God. Thus a people and a city filled with the Spirit will find a liberation of good communication.

The Good City

And it was good. The goodness, the perfection of God is reflected into a good creation. That creation ultimately resulted in good cities where all people, structures and their interrelationships are infused with his Spirit and reflect and are subject to the values of the Kingdom of God. Should there have been no fall from God's grace, cities would have occurred that were all good. In the fall of humanity, the creation of cities instead reflected the lifelong internal conflict between the nature of God within collective humanness and the sinfulness of that collectiveness.

God of the Aesthetic: City as Environment

A second aspect of *and it was good...* is that the city, as communal reflection of the work of God, is to be aesthetically pleasing (Dyrness, 1983/1991:22), just as the garden was good and was perceived of as good. It is to be ecologically integrated and humanity is to manage it.

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The godly city will also be seen to have spatial definitions that create humane environments¹⁵ and enable the garden to flourish. For biblical history begins with a garden but ends with a garden in the centre of a cubic city. Alternatively, we may presume that demographics and urban expansion are deep within the Fatherhood of God, for fathers provide environments.

God's sovereignty in fixing "the boundaries of the habitation of the peoples" (Deut 32:8) is a recurrent complex theme that relates to land and land rights in cities.¹⁶ How he does this in cities is a matter of wonder for geographers and mathematicians currently utilising fractal analysis in urban studies, for it is as if a hand outside humankind has generated patterns into which we fall. Urban demography is a great study of these processes of God's activity. The end of urban demography is predicted when the Scriptures speak of a cubic city, 1000 *stadia* high, 1000 *stadia* long, 1000 wide. We presume it is only symbolically complete, space-maximised, but what if it will actually be this shape? Certainly, the world's present population can fit one family per cubic *stadia*.¹⁷ Such theological questions lead us to a central godly relationship of people to space, community to geography.

In the mandate to *manage the earth*, he also holds the people of this city accountable for their spatial relationships and the contribution they make to this assigned task. A

15 Bakke (1997:60) asks the question, "Do we find a theology of place in the Bible?" indicating the failure of Evangelicalism to take this issue seriously when it cut itself off from the parish concept. He then seeks to develop the theme around corporate solidarity. It seems easier to develop it from the human-dust-garden motifs, as have Davies (1974) and Breuggemann (1977)

16 This is one element in theologies of land, land rights and housing for the poor (Grigg, 1985/2004).

17 If taken literally, 1 billion cubic *stadia* represents a cubic *stadia* for each family on the planet - fairly sizeable properties.

theology of urban planning flows from his Fatherhood and his delegation of managerial responsibility. The creation of Adam from dust requires our humanness to always be connected to the environment:

This interdependence with creation has another component... it is not possible for this solidarity to be broken. However much they may pride themselves on their independence, people are never “on their own” with respect to the physical environment... This is why...in rebelling against the order of things (forgetting we are dust) we not only ruin our lives, but in a sense destroy the earth as well (Dyrness, 1983/1991:30).

The Auckland disconnection of Maori from their land, of migrants in transition from basic necessities of life, of youth from fathers or even extended family are part of the source of the dissonances leading to youth gangs, a neurotic society, teen suicide. Restoring healthy environments is an essential activity of the Godhead and hence of Spirit-filled believers. The gospel of salvation of soul cannot be heard independent of reconnection to the environment.

God as Community: City as Community

The city is also relational. God says “*let us make.*” While there is the possibility of the “royal we” in the phraseology, the interpretive nature of John 1:1 indicates the presence of the Father, the Word and the Spirit. The Godhead is an “usness.”

Made in his/her likeness, we reflect that communal nature, first in the village, then the town, then the city. In the garden there are clearly defined relationships of an infinite King with his subjects and of his subjects with the forms of life around them. Humankind is to rule in God’s image, as his vice-regents and to be his brother’s and sister’s keeper. That image remains after the fall (Genesis 9:6; James 3:9), but it needs to be “renewed ... after the image of him who created them” (Col 3:10).

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Inherent in creation are relational patterns that become the foundations of the relationships of the city. Within the Godhead itself is a *communication* and there are authority relationships. The Son does only what the Father does (John 5:19). The Father delegates and gives authority to the Son (John 5: 22, 27). The Spirit bears witness to the Son (John 16:14), who speaks of the Father. Godly cities reflect such *authority within equality*.

One relationship (the human management of creation) is to be a reflection of the vertical authority — an authority-submission caring-dependent nature of the God-human-earth relationship.¹⁸ We are to *manage the created order* as vice-regents (variously understood as rule, be stewards of, or care for (Darragh, 2000)). “Thus the task of dominion does not have to do with exploitation and abuse. It has to do with securing the well-being of every other creature and bringing the promise of each to full fruition” (Brueggeman, 1982:32).

The other relationship in the cry, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (human-human) reflects the primarily horizontal relational nature of brotherhood and sisterhood, a relationship based primarily on equality and social responsibility.

18 This is in direct contrast to the notion of “subjugation” of the earth, popularly blamed for our current ecological crisis in environmental circles (White, 1967).

The creation of a companion for the man (from his ribs, not his feet nor his head) speaks of the *equality of being of male and female* in the dynamics of communication and working together. “The sexes are complementary: the true partnership is expounded by the terms that are used (a helper fit for him, 18,20 RSV; literally, a help as opposite him, i.e. corresponding to him)” (Kidner, 1967:65). This duality reflects the triune relationships in its unity. Its expansion into family reflects the triune nature of God. God’s purpose was neither male nor female but the completeness of complementarity and family.

From these two patterns of communal relationships come our patterns of the city as community. As in the Godhead, there is headship and delegated authority, expressed in city councils and other leadership structures in the city. As in the Godhead, there is division of labour and equality of being. As in the Godhead, there is the companionship that outworks itself in the entertainment, the sports life, the media, the recreation of the city.

God Structures: Cities as Structure

In the first three days in Genesis, God *creates form out of a formlessness* and emptiness,¹⁹ then he fills the form with life.²⁰ it becomes an integrated global and cosmic system, with an inherent goal. He commands humanity to manage it in his stead. As Claus Westermann points out, creation is “good or suited to the purpose for which it is being prepared” (1974: 61) –City planning and city management should be a reflection of that godly activity.

66 | This *structuring nature of God* in us is the basis of predicting the emergence of cities as part of the goal of creation. For cities are centres of structures. For example, the agricultural system is based in rural cities; banking structures built off the production of the land are also based in cities. The structuring is inherent in the delegated roles. Human management involves the naming and categorising. The mandate to manage resources leads to issues of efficiency, patterns of decision-making, the spatial form and function of the city.

Let the land produce... let the waters teem... God creates things to be fruitful. Out of the fruitfulness comes the increase in wealth (not out of paper money). This principle enables life in the city to *be fruitful and to multiply*,²¹ or in modern phraseology, the city is a centre of productive economic growth. Three times it is blessed (1:22; 1:28; 2:3). “Blessing throughout Genesis is the conferring of beneficial power that produces fertility in humanity, in livestock and lands” (Dyrness, 1983/1991:23). The agricultural and banking systems are built on this fruitfulness. These are good. People are to manage that fruitfulness, to name it and order it. Justice, efficiency and form all reflect this God-given human task.

Our question is about the “goodness” of a city. Good and godly are not dissimilar. The garden is a place for the King to walk. Similarly, the city of Revelation centres on the King and his light-giving, watered by the river, symbol of the life-giving Holy Spirit.

19 Genesis 1:2 - Formless and void, 5 - evening and morning, day and night, 8 - sky, 9 - land, 10 - sea.

20 12 - land producing vegetation, 16 - filling the heavens, 20-23 - filling the seas and sky, 25 - filling the land.

21 28-30 - ‘name’ indicates taking authority over.

Thus one aim of developing a city in which the church is growing (as with its other healthy systems), is that its worshipping nature becomes centrally illuminating and life-giving to all other city systems. The church infused with the life of the Holy Spirit is the source of healing for the nations.

We may turn to the second creation account and 4:20-22 to see also the children of the first cities in the development of the orchestra, symbol of the city as centre of the arts and of toolmaking, the beginnings of technology and industry. These lead us to define the ideal city as a place of fulfilled artistry and creativity, alongside creative technology.

Inherent in this Genesis account is a later theme from the prophets, the theme of *justice*, aiming at a city that is both good and just — two overarching goals. Justice gives that sense of rightness and fairness that all humanity seeks, Christian or not. It is based on the structuring nature, clarity of authority and equality of being, defined in these early chapters. The theme of justice leads us to a definition of a city that at all of its incremental changes is just over time, in space and in its use of resources.²² Justice is a balance of many principles, maximising different principles at different times. Justice is often related to a sense of fairness of distribution (Tonna, 1982). But it also must consider right management of resources in the context of managing the whole earth, in relationship to other ecosystems.

City as Delimited Evil

In envisioning an ideal, we need to consider the parallel theme in the Scriptures, the city of humanity in opposition to the city of God. Eventually the corrupted city of humanity is portrayed as that great city, Babylon in Revelations — a centre of world trade, immorality, greed and religiosity, to be shattered by the hand of God. Ellul (1997) outlines this, introducing us to Cain who in rebellion builds a city and of his line, “Nimrod, the verb form of whose name means ‘let us revolt,’ the world’s first conqueror” (Conn, 1992:19).

Idealism must recognise the realities of the struggle between these two cities and create restraints to evil. In seeking to impart the vision of the city of God within this city, we must remember the globalisation of Babylon across the earth, purveyor of immorality and luxury. Proclaiming the ideal city of God invokes warfare by the human and spiritual forces arrayed against it in the Babylonian city that seeks to raise its head from our collective fallen nature.

Cities, the Genesis record seems to imply, are provisions of God’s common grace; they play a remedial role in human life. Through them, God restrains the development of evil, blesses fallen creatures and works out his sovereign purpose in both judgement and grace (Conn, 1992: 19).

22 First commented on in *Cry of the Urban Poor* as a ‘Just Urbanisation Gradient’ (Grigg, 1992/2004:91).

FIG. 7: THE NATURE OF GOD AS REFLECTED IN THE GOOD CITY

GOD AS RULER

- >Fathering Cities
- >Authority Structures

GOD WHO STRUCTURES

- >City: Centre of Systems
- >City: Managed Under God
- >Efficient, Patterned, Productive
- >Delimited Evil in Cities

GOD OF TIME

- >City in Process of Incremental Development
- >Growing City
- >Seasonal Rhythm of Work and Rest

GOD AS CREATOR

- >City as Centre of Creativity
- >City of Good Work and Rest
- >Artistic City
- >Fruitful City



THE IDEAL CITY

God the Holy Spirit as
Source of City Life

GOD AS COMMUNICATOR

- >City as Centre of Knowledge
- >Culture Affirming City
- >City as Media Centre

GOD AS COMMUNITY

- >Social Responsibility
- >Just City
- >City Diversity in Unity
- >Equality in the City
- >Male-Female Complementariness

GOD AS ENVIRONMENTALLY LIFE-GIVING

- >Aesthetic City
 - >Garden in the City
 - >Humane Environments
 - >Planned Space
 - >Cities as Healing
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Fig 7: Thirty-five elements of the character of God predicting the good, the ideal city, as his being is reflected in the collective humanity of cities.

Conclusion

The above themes give us conversational frameworks in which we can engage any city in envisioning ethical, cultural and strategic issues. The stream flowing through the city, the life-giving Spirit, is able to cleanse, heal and cause the city to become fruitful, productive, artistic, well managed – the good, the godly city.