

FAITH BIBLE SEMINARY

CHURCH IN BABYLON

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CHURCH IN BABYLON

“His spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols” (Acts 17:16b).¹

This is Luke’s statement about Paul when he was in Athens, a city known for its religious history and philosophy.² Most of the cities in the Bible display a density of man’s depravity as sinful people come to live together, each one trying to make a name for himself (Gen 11:4).

Are large cities today too different from the ones in the Bible? Maybe they are worse. Living as native missionaries in atheistic Berlin,³ my family and I have the sobering experience of seeing depravity, idolatry, and hostility on every corner. To get from the parking lot to our church, we have to cross a bridge, where drug addicts sit at the bottom, gay couples express their love while crossing it, and hung-over partygoers try to sober up again. Cities certainly are breeding grounds for depravity, but that also makes them fertile grounds for the gospel to shine brightly in dark, Babylon-like places. The church in urban cities should be provoked to serve and share the truth.

This essay briefly explores what the whole Bible says about the city and how the church can be a light in today’s “Babylons.”

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the ESV.

² Thomas V. Brisco, *Holman Bible Atlas*, Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 251–252.

³ Paul Froese and Steven Pfaff, “Explaining a Religious Anomaly: A Historical Analysis of Secularization in Eastern Germany,” *J. Sci. Study Relig.* 44.4 (2005): 397–422; Peter Thompson, “Eastern Germany: The Most Godless Place on Earth,” *The Guardian*, 22 September 2012, § Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/sep/22/atheism-east-germany-godless-place>.

I. Surveying City-principles in the Bible

There are multiple ways to survey what the Bible says about the city. The 1,400+ mentions of the word city plus the 345 city names make it impossible to cover every passage in the scope of this paper. Studying the most famous cities presents the same challenge but would at least use the Old and New Testament categories. Instead, the approach chosen here will highlight several cities and focus on three sobering principles about the city found throughout Scripture.

Bookends

Before developing the principles, every student of the city must understand the bookends of the Bible—Eden and the heavenly city—as God-designed dwelling places for his people.

Eden

God's purpose is to be worshiped by and dwell with his image bearers on earth. Even though Eden was not a city per se, it was the central point and perfect environment from which mankind should have ruled, spread, worshiped, and fellowshiped as a community (Gen 1:26–28; 2:15–25).⁴ Keller notes that the heavenly city “is the Garden of Eden, remade.”⁵ Therefore, the first bookend is about the pre-fallen setting of God dwelling with man in the Garden of Eden, which would have eventually led to a city-like environment if Gen 3 had not happened.

⁴ Manuel Ortiz, “The Church and the City,” *Themelios* 28.2 (2003): 49; T. Desmond Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, Third Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 123–124.

⁵ Tim Keller, “A Theology of Cities,” *Cru.Org*, n.d., <https://www.cru.org/us/en/train-and-grow/leadership-training/sending-your-team/a-theology-of-cities.html>.

The Heavenly City

The second bookend is the heavenly city every believer is looking forward to. In the heavenly Jerusalem, he will dwell and live without the presence of sin in the presence of the Lamb (Rev 19–21). The two bookends show that “the city is first of all people, created by God and gathered together to serve Him and live for His glory.”⁶

Able, Abraham and the heroes of the faith were hoping for the heavenly city (Heb 11:13–16). In Bunyan’s words, the “Celestial City”⁷ is where the Christian’s true citizenship belongs (Eph 3:19; Phil 3:20) and the motivation to live as worthy sojourners (1 Pet 2:11–12).

If God intended for man to live together in harmony with each other and with him, then cities in the fallen world are but a dim reflection of God’s intentions. Acknowledging that God uses the city to bring about his purpose by presenting a picture of the longing for togetherness and fellowship of his creation encourages the believer to be salt and light in an urban world tainted by sin.⁸

What happened between the bookends will be discussed next and could be summarized under the term “City of Destruction,”⁹ where “man is sustained by the love of self, even to the despising of God.”¹⁰

⁶ Floyd McClung, *Seeing Cities with the Eyes of God* (Tarrytown, N.Y: Chosen Books, 1991), 66.

⁷ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress: From This World to That Which Is to Come* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1995), 62.

⁸ Graham Ward, “Why Is the City so Important for Christian Theology?,” *Cross Curr.* 52.4 (2003): 472.

⁹ Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress: From This World to That Which Is to Come*, 76.

¹⁰ Warren Gage, “The City of God and the Cities of Men,” *Ligonier Ministries*, 18 March 2006, <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/city-god-and-cities-men>.

City Principles in the Bible

Cities are places of density¹¹ where opportunities for the good and the bad are rampant. Keller observes, “Sadly, there has never been a city on earth that is not saturated with human sin and corruption.”¹² While the city is to be a dwelling place of peace (cf. Num 35:9–34),¹³ this section will briefly focus on three sobering principles concerning the city apparent after the fall: depravity, desire, and diversity.¹⁴

Density of Depravity

The city has a *density of depravity*, the overarching principle, which consequently leads to the other two in this section. All of humanity has been corrupted since Genesis 3. Paul sent a whole discourse about depravity to the Romans (Rom 1:18–3:20). Because of total depravity, wickedness is everywhere. Where many people come together in dense urban cities, creativity to sin is frantic, and the corruption of the heart is on a fuller display for the world to see.

Most cities mentioned in the Bible are displays of evil. The Old Testament presents us with a plethora of cities—four will be highlighted briefly: a) Enoch, b) Babel-Babylon, c) Sodom, and d) Nineveh.

¹¹ “According to the Bible, the essence of a city was not the population’s size but its density.” Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 135.

¹² Keller, *Center Church*, 143.

¹³ For a positive rendering of the city, see Keller, *Center Church*, 136–142; Al Barth, “A Vision for Our Cities,” *Redeemer City to City*, 1 January 2009, <https://redeemercitytocity.com/articles-stories/a-vision-for-our-cities>; David S. Lim, “The City in the Bible” (Urbanleaders.org, 27 January 2004), <https://www.urbanleaders.org/540UrbanReality/19UrbanTheo/LimCity%20in%20the%20Bible.htm>.

¹⁴ The author understands that there are many more facets that could be explored with this topic.

Enoch is the first post-fall city built by Cain (Gen 4:17).¹⁵ It displays rebellion, pride, and man-made security opposing God's judgment outlined in Gen 4:14.¹⁶ A city that marks the sad beginning of civilization apart from God.¹⁷ Boice states, "the problem of 'civilization without God' is not civilization itself but rather its godless characteristics."¹⁸

After the flood, the people of *Babel-Babylon*¹⁹ refused to fill the earth and built a tower to pridefully make a name for themselves (Gen 11:4).²⁰ This was a demonstration of man's depravity, and the consequences are known to this day (Gen 11:7–9).²¹ Later, becoming *Babylon*, the peak of wickedness and depravity is continually referenced throughout Rev 18:21.²² It is a city "that represented self-glory, pride, and opposition to God's purposes, both religiously and politically."²³

¹⁵ Jonathan K. Dodson and Acts 29, "Hate the City, Love the City," *Acts 29*, 20 July 2010, <https://www.acts29.com/hate-the-city-love-the-city/?lang=pt-br>.

¹⁶ *THE INTERNATIONAL STANDARD BIBLE ENCYCLOPAEDIA* 1–5, s.v. "Enoch, (City)"; James Montgomery Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 1:263; Nancy Guthrie, "A Biblical Theology of Cities," *Crossway*, 8 November 2018, <https://www.crossway.org/articles/a-biblical-theology-of-cities>.

¹⁷ Boice, *Genesis: An Expository Commentary*, 1:265–266.

¹⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *Two Cities, Two Loves: Christian Responsibility in a Crumbling Culture*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2024), 42.

¹⁹ For an in-depth treaty on Babel-Babylon, see Bobie Hodge, "History and Archaeology of the World's Oldest City—Babel/Babylon and the Tower of Babel," 18 January 2023, <https://answersingenesis.org/tower-of-babel/history-and-archaeology-of-worlds-oldest-city/>.

²⁰ "The people in Genesis 11 ... would make a god beholden to them, ... they would be people favored by a god." John H Walton, "Babel's Invitation," *Christ. Today* 67.2 (2023): 76.

²¹ Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 129.

²² "From Genesis 11 all the way through Revelation, Babylon is represented as the epitome of a civilization built on selfishness, pride, and violence — the ultimate city of man." Keller, *Center Church*, 142.

²³ John MacArthur and Mayhue, Richard, eds., *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 2017), 445. Cf. T. Desmond Alexander, *The City of God and the Goal of Creation*, ed. Dane C. Ortlund and Miles Van Pelt, *Short Studies in Biblical Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 28–29.

Sodom's destruction was due to wickedness and willful engagement in sin (Gen 13:13),²⁴ pride and haughtiness (Ezek 16:49–50), and the absence of just ten righteous men (Gen 18:22–33).²⁵

Nineveh, first mentioned in Gen 10:11, is one of the oldest cities in the Old Testament. It was a significant city that held a position of authority and power for many centuries.²⁶ That made it “one of the largest and most powerful cities in the world and ... one of the most hostile to the God of the Bible.”²⁷ Yet it was important to God (Jonah 4:11). After all its evil came before the Lord (Jonah 1:2), the Ninevites repented quickly, which delayed the judgment for their wickedness for about 150 years.²⁸ Nineveh's later display of depravity leads to its destruction, as prophesied in the book of Nahum (cf. Zeph 2:15).

Transitioning to the New Testament, the depravity of the cities is more subtle. What follows are three highlights of the density of depravity in the New Testament cities: a) Rome, b) Corinth, and c) Jerusalem.

Rome was the Capitol during New Testament times. Referred to as Babylon (1 Pet 5:13), it was a place where sin and selfishness manifested.²⁹ It was the center of edicts, authority, and rule, where persecution of either Jews or Christians was carried out. From casting out the Jews

²⁴ Abraham Z Ephros, “Nineveh and Sodom Juxtaposed: Contrasts and Parallels: Jewish Bible Quarterly,” *Jew. Bible Q.* 30.4 (2002): 243.

²⁵ McClung, *Seeing Cities with the Eyes of God*, 70; Raymond J. Bakke and Jim Hart, *The Urban Christian: Effective Ministry in Today's Urban World* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 64.

²⁶ Boice, *Two Cities, Two Loves: Christian Responsibility in a Crumbling Culture*, 51–52.

²⁷ Barth, “A Vision for Our Cities.”

²⁸ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck, and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 1:1470.

²⁹ Walter A Elwell, “Babylon, Babylonia,” *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*.

(Acts 18:2)³⁰ to using the cruelest methods of killing Christians. Hostility against God is wickedness and a display of depravity in the capital city. The Romans would have seen the depravity firsthand when Paul wrote a detailed treatise in Rom 1:18–3:20.

As a major trade city, *Corinth* prospered, and with it, depravity greatly flourished. “Corinth became so morally corrupt that its very name became synonymous with debauchery and moral depravity.” First Corinthians 6:9–10 lists sins that Corinth was known for, and the strong rebuke in 1 Cor 5 demonstrates that the city's immorality impacted the church.

The last example of dense depravity is *Jerusalem*. Being the capital of God’s chosen nation, Jerusalem’s wickedness is especially significant. Old Testament warnings against the city are manifold (cf. Jer 5).³¹ The most prominent display of Jerusalem's wickedness is the rallied crowds that scream the words, “Crucify him!” The people of Jerusalem were so wicked that they chose to free a murderer, deciding to kill the Son of God, demonstrating that depravity does not have to come through immorality or sexual perversion. It can be on display by ignorance and religiosity.

To summarize, in sin, everything “becomes tainted and idolatrous and exhausting, of course. The purpose of the city of rebellion is ‘to make a name for ourselves’. ... It is a spirituality of darkness of enormous force, it is a motivation moving many or most people who move toward the city.”³²

³⁰ Cf. Eckhard J. Schnabel, “The Persecution of Christians in the First Century: Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society,” *J. Evang. Theol. Soc.* 61.3 (2018): 530–531.

³¹ “The city, ... is also an accumulator of potencies of evil. ... In the capital all evil is concentrated.” Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1988), 294.

³² Keller, “A Theology of Cities.”

Density of Desire

The density of depravity leads to a *density of desire*. Surveying the Bible for its bleak principles for urban cities, this short section will focus on the density of sinful desires lived out as a “conscious impulse toward something that promises enjoyment or satisfaction in its attainment.”³³ In a sense, it is wrong worship that leads to sin. If desire leads to worship, all the cities mentioned earlier would qualify to be highlighted again. Sodom’s sodomy (Jude 1:7) or Corinth’s temple prostitution are reminders that depravity inevitably breeds sinful desire. In addition, sinful desire and false worship are seen in the idolatry of the Canaanite cities, Ephesus, and Athens.

The *Canaanite cities* are notoriously known for their desire to satisfy their longings through idol worship. Important strongholds and large cities lived out their passions through incest, child sacrifice, homosexuality, and bestiality (Lev 18, esp. vv. 24–27). They were judged, and Israel should destroy the people of the land (Deut 20:16–17). This was to starve out idolatry and prevent future problems stemming from false desires that peak in dense environments.³⁴

Ephesus was known for its belief system. The Ephesians worshiped about 50 gods; Artemis was the most famous. Their worship included but was not limited to sexual orgies and human sacrifices, a depiction of sinful desires to be fulfilled, and fueled in a dense city environment.³⁵ This may be why the church in Ephesus was called to put on the armor of God to withstand the schemes of Satan (Eph 6:10–20).

³³ “Definition of DESIRE,” 11 April 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/desire>.

³⁴ “Why Did God Command the Extermination / Genocide of the Canaanites, Women and Children Included?,” *GotQuestions.Org*, n.d., <https://www.gotquestions.org/Canaanites-extinction.html>.

³⁵ David Seal, “Ephesus,” *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*.

Athens outshines Ephesus' idol worship. When Paul visited Athens, he noticed the altars of the many gods (Acts 17:16).³⁶ It was one of the oldest cities Paul visited, “endowed with many more visualizations of the deities that the Athenians worshiped.”³⁷ In short, Athens was a hotbed of lived-out desires.

It is important to note that these cities are examples of the density of desire that leads to false worship.

Density of Diversity

Where people live and come together, sin is not far. That is especially true for dense cities where depravity and desire are often unashamedly lived out. A third principle—*density of diversity*—is a reality in any urban environment. This section revisits some of the mentioned cities and will emphasize the bleak reality that diversity without God will breed sinful culture and hostility. Diversity is introduced in Gen 11 when God confused the languages because of the disobedience of the citizens of Babel (Gen 11:4). Every form of unity sought without God will eventually lead to sinful diversity.³⁸

Genesis 4 demonstrates how cities fabricate the culture of the world. “These people ignored and disobeyed God, to such an extent that eventually their wickedness came to characterize the

³⁶ The word κατείδωλος (full of idols) appears only here in the Bible, demonstrating the severity of Athens' idol worship. *A GREEK-ENGLISH LEXICON OF THE NEW TESTAMENT AND OTHER EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE*, s.v. “Κατείδωλος.”

³⁷ Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Acts*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 5 (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2012), 722.

³⁸ Keller, “A Theology of Cities.”

human race as a whole, to such an extent that God determined to destroy it.”³⁹ The city's influence on the culture cannot be denied when studying Nineveh, Babylon, or Rome. The Canaanite cities caused the Israelites to worship idols and adopt the culture fabricated in the cities that spread throughout the country. Keller summarizes, “The cultural-development of the city under sin creates a place of pride, arrogance, [and] excess.”⁴⁰

Diverse cities also create hostility. This can be seen in Jerusalem, where the people gathered to crucify the Messiah, or when Paul confronted cities with the gospel and was met with enmity to the point of imprisonment, beatings (Philippi), and stoning (Lystra).

An all-encompassing look at the different cities in the Bible is beyond the scope of this essay. After highlighting the bookends to understand God’s intention, this section looked at selected cities to demonstrate the density of depravity, desire, and diversity. The following section suggests three truths the church can provide to be salt and light to the city.

II. The Church in Babylon

If the city is a breeding ground for sin, idolatry, and hostility, how much more is it a fertile ground for the Gospel?⁴¹ After discussing what the Bible says about the city, this shorter section will make a case for the church in Babylon.⁴² Churches have the unique privilege of being laborers of the harvest (Matt 9:37–38). Jeremiah 29:7 is the most quoted verse by authors who

³⁹ John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2013), 98.

⁴⁰ Keller, “A Theology of Cities.”

⁴¹ Cf. Ward, “Why Is the City so Important for Christian Theology?,” 472.

⁴² While focusing on urban city ministry, the author is fully aware that Christian witness is needed everywhere. Cf. Kevin DeYoung, “Evangelicals and Cities: A Discussion in Need of Clarity,” 8 July 2014, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/evangelicals-and-cities-a-discussion-in-need-of-clarity/>.

have written about urban ministry.⁴³ In it, Jeremiah encourages the Jews living in exile (Babylon of all places) to “seek the welfare of the city... and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” This verse reminds Christians that they live in exile until they are called home to heaven (2 Cor 5:1–10; Eph 3:19; Phil 3:20; 1 Pet 2:11–12). How, then, is the Christian to be salt and light to the places where most people nowadays live?⁴⁴ Where depravity, desire, and diversity are so dense and intimidating?

Believers need to stay faithful to the Bible as they seek to apply the truth of the Gospel to their specific urban location. Because the location of every church “will have a shaping influence on which elements of the Bible’s storyline they wish to emphasize,”⁴⁵ the focus will be on the churches’ importance to provide the gospel, perspective, and safety to repel, reorient, and redefine the abovementioned principles.⁴⁶

Churches Provide Christ’s Gospel to Repel Depravity

The gospel of Christ is the most essential truth anyone can hear.⁴⁷ A church needs to first and foremost provide the gospel that is able to repel depravity and save lost sinners (cf. Rom 3:21–31). The prophets, Christ, or Apostles, called cities and their inhabitants to repentance. The church must seek ways in which the gospel is faithfully proclaimed with words *and* deeds (cf. Jer

⁴³ Cf. John Piper, “Seek Your City’s Good,” *Desiring God*, 23 April 2012, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/seek-your-citys-good>.

⁴⁴ Ward, “Why Is the City so Important for Christian Theology?,” 463.

⁴⁵ D. A. Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 84.

⁴⁶ The practical ministries of urban churches are as multi-faceted as the city districts they are serving. “... the people ... need a real Lord and Savior who died and rose for them so that he can take away all of their sins ... No other message even begins to help.” Mez McConnell and Mike McKinley, *Church in Hard Places: How the Local Church Brings Life to the Poor and Needy*, 9Marks (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), 52.

⁴⁷ Cf. D. A. Carson, *Love in Hard Places* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Books, 2002), 168.

27:9; Rom 10:9; Gal 6:9). To provide the gospel for the city environment, a church, having prayer as a solid foundation, should be warm and dignified in their services, preaching intelligently by connecting the truth of scripture to the pressing urban life issues, and emphasize a positive view on the city to seek its welfare.⁴⁸ A church needs to know its surroundings and strive to get involved for the sake of the gospel because it knows that it is “engaged in a cosmic battle that God has allowed to be played out on the earth he created.”⁴⁹

Churches Provide God’s Perspective to Reorient Desire

With a propensity to follow one's natural desires and fear anything but God (cf. Prov 1:7) come the hopelessness, helplessness, and hurt that a sin-cursed world and sinful heart bring with it. Amongst other venues, a church should seek to faithfully preach the Word and provide biblical counsel, giving hope, help, and healing to the saint, sufferer, and sinner to reorient the desires of the heart towards fear or worship of the Lord.⁵⁰

Churches Provide Safe Places to Redefine Diversity

Churches provide the gospel, perspective, and a safe place to redefine diversity. Not only in a way that the Holy Spirit has provided the church with diverse gifts that should be put to service (Rom 12:3–20; 1 Pet 4:9–10) but also by placing rich and poor, black and white, male and female side by side as a demonstration of the unity that is provided in Christ (Rom 3:29; Eph

⁴⁸ Lyle E. Schaller, ed., *Center City Churches: The New Urban Frontier*, Ministry for the Third Millennium (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 33–41.

⁴⁹ Steve Viars, *Loving Your Community: Proven Practices for Community-Based Outreach Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2020), 22.

⁵⁰ For an argument of evangelistic biblical counseling, see Paul Peabody, “Biblical Counseling as an Evangelistic Method: A Golden Opportunity for Evangelizing the Unsaved and Making Disciples for Christ” (The Master’s College, May 2012).

2:13–16; 4:1–6). God has a multi-ethnic redemption plan (Gen 12:1–3; 22:15–18) that has come to fulfillment in Christ, “and the boundary of the people of God is no longer marked by Jewish identity but by repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.”⁵¹

The urban church, in particular, needs to seek diversity as a place of safety by clinging to the truth that it is an embassy for the heavenly kingdom and its city (cf. 2 Cor 5:20).

If urban churches redefine diversity, “The glory of Christ is seen most vividly when outsiders observe the cross-shaped and cross-cultured love and unity that believers from varying backgrounds share with one another.”⁵²

Churches are embassies for the kingdom of God! They are the only institution that can provide Christ’s gospel, God’s perspective, and a safe place to repel depravity, reorient desires, and redefine diversity. She needs to shine bright for the “Babylonians” to come to the knowledge of the living God who gave his son to reconcile with those who believe.

Conclusion

Are we provoked when we see depravity, desires, and diversity in cities that contradict the worship of the living God? We should be, and it should prompt the believer to seek the welfare of any city, as people are drawn to togetherness and community. The cities are breeding grounds for sin, yes, but they are also fertile grounds for the gospel that repels depravity, reorients desires, and redefines diversity.

⁵¹ Aubrey Sequeira, “Re-Thinking Homogeneity: The Biblical Case for Multi-Ethnic Churches,” *9Marks*, 25 September 2015, <https://www.9marks.org/article/re-thinking-homogeneity-the-biblical-case-for-multi-ethnic-churches/>.

⁵² Sequeira, “Re-Thinking Homogeneity.”

This essay does not give due diligence to the topic, as countless books, journals, and articles exist about how a church should engage the city. It is a starting point and should encourage the reader to think about three principles that can be countered with the truth of Scripture.

Oh, Church arise to proclaim the truth in Babylon so that sinners may be justified, saints may be sanctified, and God may be glorified!

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