

Community and Belonging: Radical Autonomy and Other Challenges in Urban Ministry

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Introduction

Something has gone wrong in our culture. Many people across this country who cannot seem to agree on much tend to agree on this sentiment. The problem manifests itself in political polarization, but I do not think the problem is primarily political. There is a broader fragmentation of our culture. What if the problem is one of the breakdown of community, the loss of meaning, and the loss of purpose in life?¹

We enjoy the convenience and accessibility of modern technology, an improved economy, and other markers of cultural progress. Yet loneliness and dysfunctionality pose what some leaders claim is a significant public health threat.² People are increasingly alienated from one another. Do leaders in ministry, particularly in urban ministry, have anything to bring to these issues at this time? Perhaps we have some way of speaking to what Yuval Levin calls our “fractured republic.”³ Maybe Christ-followers have something to say about culture, community, meaning, and purpose that seem to be missing amidst the anger, fear, and indignation.

Clay Routledge, in his work *Supernatural*, notes that fewer people in Europe and North America identify with a religion than in past decades. They do not attend church, engage in religious practices, or view faith as an important part of their lives as compared to previous generations.⁴ People who advocate for the secularization of society applaud such cultural change because they see it as evidence that people are turning away from all things supernatural. Routledge observes these trends may be less about our abandoning the supernatural and more about our abandoning each other. A professor of psychology at North Dakota State University, Routledge points his readers in a direction for us to consider with these words:

It isn't enough to make life longer, easier, or even more pleasurable. People need to feel that they matter, that they are members of a meaningful social world.... Our society is becoming not more truly secular but more individualistic and, as a result, more likely to suffer from an epidemic of meaninglessness.⁵

Indeed, as Nathan Schlueter has noted in the book *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, "Ours is a culture against culture, an anti-culture, and the consequences have been a tragic disintegration and fragmentation of individuals and communities."⁶ We all know, however, that it is easier to critique than to construct, so I cautiously want to try to point us in a more constructive direction.

A Proposal for Urban Ministry

As we make these observations, we recognize the Christian voice is being discharged from its formerly privileged role in Western society. During this time of transition we are discovering how accustomed we have become to the assumptions of the culture around us. If on the one hand we are shaken by the changes in the shifting social landscape, we are faced on the other hand with a rude awakening to the fact that many Christ-followers are more and more like the culture we inhabit. Donald Posterski notes that instead of being in the world but not of the world, as Jesus highlighted for his disciples, we have inverted Jesus' dictum and become of the world but not in the world.⁷

One of the roles Christian leaders can play is to help persons involved in urban ministry to understand the need to live between gospel and culture.⁸ In doing so, we can remind ourselves of these things. In addition, we can seek to exemplify these truths so we can seek to reflect these values for the culture around us. We must listen to the gospel that calls us to know and value things in a different way.

One of the challenges for all of us is to maintain a distinctive Christian presence that stands without reservation on the uniqueness of the gospel in contexts where the gospel is not well received. As Harold Netland has reminded us so well, we must not be forced into a false "either/or" choice between a supposed intolerant particularism or a supposed tolerant relativism simply because it is no longer culturally acceptable to live out the worldview implications of the gospel, particularly in some urban contexts.⁹ We must maintain a commitment to gospel particularism while at the same time addressing the legitimate concerns for religious tolerance heard so loudly in today's culture.

Unfortunately, Christians are often described as intolerant people or as a persecuting group or as demeaning toward others. We can lead the way in simultaneously modeling a spirit of understanding that seeks reconciliation along with an unapologetic commitment to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ and the gospel message. In this way believers ministering in urban contexts have a unique

opportunity to be a faithful missional voice in and for a fragmented world to help establish a credible Christian presence in places often hostile to the gospel.

Called to Interpret and Clarify

One of the most important actions as ministers of the gospel is to interpret texts. One of our roles in this regard involves not only guiding our congregations in the interpretation of sacred texts, but also in serving as hermeneutical guides for the churches and the culture at-large by providing interpretation and clarification of the gospel and its entailments.

That being the case, what does all of this have to do with urban ministry? I would suggest a great deal. People cannot effectively respond to something they find hard to understand. One of the responsibilities of church leaders is to help people within their contexts and persons with whom we partner around the world by providing helpful interpretation and clarification that will enable others to understand what Christianity teaches regarding the nature of ultimate reality and the fate of individuals at death. We need to move the entire starting point of the conversation back one step.

Rather than beginning with any kind of direct encounter, it could be more fruitful first to address the assumptions of many people in our culture that all paths lead to the same destination. If relativists recognize that all religions cannot be true at the same time, they are generally more open to considering evidence for one particular faith. The first priority is to carry out the role of pre-evangelism by maintaining a credible Christian presence in the world.

We can accomplish this goal and remain committed to the legitimate concern that underlies the contemporary awareness of world religions. Christians in urban contexts, as well as Christ-followers in general, can and should live together with others as agents of grace and ambassadors of reconciliation. It is critical for Christians to affirm that we stand against racism, prejudice, bigotry, and other forms of intolerance that deny people the right freely to make their own decisions regarding matters of faith.

This position may seem obvious, but once again Harold Netland has reminded us that many people falsely assume religious people do not believe in religious freedom, especially Christian particularists who maintain the uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the gospel message. Yet pluralists need to recognize it cannot be the case that Islamic monotheism and the plural gods of Hinduism are both correct at the same time. Thus when dealing with pluralists it can be helpful to point out that most religions make both exclusive and diverse claims. Christians are not the only people who are concerned about these vital matters. We can be champions of religious freedom and the rights of others while maintaining an unapologetic commitment to the exclusive claims of the gospel.¹⁰

We also can help our friends see it would be wrong to be tolerant about some things. A person who observes a violent crime and makes no attempt to stop it or report it would hardly be described as tolerant. Certain behaviors should not be tolerated for a society. In the same way, certain beliefs have consequences for all eternity. We can also suggest that although truth sometimes appears narrow, this does not make it intolerant. At times only one thing can be correct.¹¹

Distinguishing Preferences and Truth Claims

One of our tasks of church leaders is to help people distinguish between issues that are matters of personal preference and those matters best understood as truth claims. Many of us seem to get these categories confused on a somewhat regular basis.

Such is the case with many important religious claims. One way we can help is to assist people in sorting out the differences in categories. For example, to suggest that crimson is my favorite color, especially on Saturdays during the fall, is merely a matter of preference. On the other hand, to suggest Jesus was executed on a cross, rose from the dead, and appeared to more than five hundred witnesses is first and foremost a truth claim. It is important for us to help others understand the differences between matters of preference and matters of truth. Much of the misunderstanding, contentiousness, and polarization in our culture results from our inability to distinguish these issues. Communication, or the lack thereof, on social media only compounds the problem.

In light of the conflicting truth claims often put forward in a pluralistic context, it does not make sense to believe all truth claims are equally valid. We live in an age where many think no rational person could possibly believe that only one religion is true while so many other religions exist and even thrive. This reality is no cause for us to jump ship from the historical truth claims of the Christian faith.

At this point it may be helpful to be reminded of John Searle's observations in *The Construction of Social Reality*. He notes that although social reality is ontologically subjective, it is epistemically objective. Yes, social reality and the perception of that reality is constituted by a collective intentionality. Yet, just because human beings make social reality does not mean any single individual human can make social reality.¹² It is here that the Christian vision for community provides a better option than the radical autonomy proposed by our culture.¹³ We must address important matters of anthropology, including not only the question of "what it means to be human," but "what it means to be human in relation to others."¹⁴

Colgate University professor Barry Alan Shain has observed that society has seemingly lost a sense of propriety under a misguided understanding of freedom and individualism. Moreover, he contends that freedom depends on a sense of accountability established by community parameters, meaning we must reclaim this sense of community.¹⁵

Persons serving in urban contexts can be both apologetic and educational. The educational role may involve a genuine pre-evangelism by providing a Christian presence in the world. Churches in urban contexts have the opportunity to create an environment for spiritual progress and to engage in persuasive and authentic interaction with people, while also demonstrating the credibility of the Christian faith by our presence, actions, and words.¹⁶

Creating such an environment has as its ideal the goal of connecting the large unevangelized world with the God of the Bible. The initial role of ministry in urban contexts is not so much that of shining a floodlight as it is lighting a candle. If someone is sitting in a dark room and you flip a switch that floods the room with light, the person in the room may wince and turn away from the source of the light with eyes shut tightly.¹⁷

On the other hand, if you walk into a dark room with a candle, the person in the darkness will be drawn and attracted to the light. The unique role of distinctive urban ministry in both our intercultural and global contexts is the lighting of a candle in a dark world. As the apostle Paul instructed the Philippians, let us shine like stars in the midst of a fallen world (Phil. 2:15). Jesus noted that Kingdom citizens are the light of the world (Matt. 5:14).

We understand that God is light and in Him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5). At the same time, we recognize the world is separated from God and, consequently, people are in darkness. Our role is to build ongoing relationships to help guide people to the truth claims of the gospel. Hopefully such opportunities will help dispel misconceptions and break down barriers to the gospel message.

A Call to Authentic Community

For this kind of interaction to take place, we must model authentic community in urban contexts, even as we seek opportunities not only to speak but also to listen to others. Careful listening is an art. Before we can articulate the truths of God's Kingdom, it is important that we learn to listen. As someone has well said, "How will they hear unless we learn to listen?"¹⁸

So where does this leave us? With God's help we need to engage in the serious work that puts evangelism, education, justice, and missions together as partners rather than competitors. Let us encourage persons in urban ministry, as well as others, to wrestle with these shared issues. Should we fail to do so, we will not be faithful in preparing people in the churches for leadership and service in the twenty-first century.

The good news, however, is that many people committed to urban ministry accept the idea that Christians are to "be doers of the Word and not hearers only" (James 1:22). They understand they are to work for justice while simultaneously taking the good news of the gospel to our polarized world. This generation of urban ministers articulates the holistic call of the Kingdom of God much more effectively

and with greater zeal than many in the generations before them.¹⁹ Some of us unfortunately still struggle with the challenges to develop such a holistic ministry.²⁰

We now live in a diverse and fragmented global world. The diversity found in urbanization foreshadows the coming reality to the majority of North America; heterogeneity will be the norm. We must recognize the things that bring us together are not our homogeneous characteristics, but our deep love for Jesus Christ Who has given us new life and has reconciled us to God. Churches of homogeneous crowds will need to be replaced with scores of neighborhood congregations that reflect the granular diversity of their communities.

Our lives are to become an offering of thanksgiving to Jesus Christ, faithfully expressed in lifestyles of compassion toward the least of these in our world. We have been called to be agents of grace and ambassadors of reconciliation. What will be needed are disciple-making strategies that can present the good news winsomely to a culture that carries little Christian memory. Our guide is Holy Scripture itself, inspired and illumined by God's Holy Spirit.²¹

We should assume a humble posture of listening to and learning from one another. All of us bring strengths and deficiencies to the work of ministry. Fear is a strong force in keeping us apart. Recognizing this reality is the first step in the right direction. A love for Jesus Christ and a desire to understand more of His truth can counter that fear and help us launch an exciting future for the rapidly changing aspects of urban ministry in the days ahead.²²

Toward an International and Intercultural Future

In this sense, we must think about our role not only for a rapidly changing global context, but also for an intercultural one. The major cities of the United States look as if the world has moved to our doorsteps. Poverty, homelessness, drug abuse, and violence surround people living in major cities. Our cities are multiethnic and intercultural. As Peter Cha has noted, our work must be expanded not only to have an international component but an increased intercultural one.²³ We must grapple with our isolation as we seek to address the loneliness and meaninglessness felt by others. These tasks will require courageous, faithful, and purposeful living in the days ahead. It will require greater intentionality to exemplify and model what is distinctive about a Christ-centered community.

The missional and educational task of people serving in urban contexts is to develop faithful global Christians who exemplify intercultural competence. These people are deeply committed to Jesus Christ and the good news of the gospel. We need to ask for fresh eyes to see the potential role that faithful urban ministry has as the means for establishing a Christian presence in the world.

Implications for the Larger Evangelical World

Unfortunately, the larger evangelical world today reflects much of the fragmentation of our culture.²⁴ This movement is anything but a unified flourishing movement in North America. In fact, without the presence and influence of Billy Graham, this movement is one whose unity and health are in serious jeopardy. Evangelicals must take heart and recognize that large sectors of the movement unfortunately take their cues from the culture more so than from the church or Christian leaders.

As Harvard University sociologist Robert Putnam observed, 21st century evangelicals unfortunately seem to be more influenced by political persuasion and identity rather than historic Christian commitments.²⁵ I would add that this observation has sadly become even more of a reality than was the case a decade ago when Professor Putnam was in the process of penning his influential book. We need new commitments to prioritize the gospel, the Scriptures, and the best of the Christian tradition as our guide.

Many of us who understandably want to avoid becoming a particular political party at prayer need not rush in a reactionary manner into the waiting arms of a revisionist progressivism. On the other hand, those of us with concerns about the platform of the other political parties should avoid steering toward a reductionist fundamentalism. Neither a new form of liberalism nor a reactionary fundamentalism are wise options at this time. What is needed is a biblical orthodoxy. We need a historic, apostolic Christianity – a faithful intercultural, transcontinental, and intergenerational evangelicalism. Such a proposal will need prayerful wisdom to avoid unintentionally moving in the direction of an unhealthy inclusivism or heterodoxical universalism.²⁶

Let us seek to work to bring together Christian worldview thinking with faithful worldview living as we envision the priority of evangelism alongside the need for justice, a vision for global missions and intercultural service, an unhindered gospel presentation with informed contextualization, careful biblical interpretation coupled with Spirit-enabled proclamation, serious theological reflection combined with humble cultural engagement, and renewed rigorous theological formation. Proper theological formation is not disconnected from faithful churchmanship. Such churchmanship is characterized by proclamation, worship, evangelism, a sense of community, prayer, and service. In making these vital connections, let us not fail to carefully and sensitively distinguish the gospel from its entailments or to separate our primary theological commitments from their broader worldview implications.

May God help us to model authentic humility, kindness, compassion, gentleness, patience, and forbearance, accompanied by a diligence to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. All of these characteristics help to shape a commitment to community and belonging. Persons committed to urban ministry must “hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21) while faithfully “holding forth

the word of life” (Phil. 2:14-16). Living with a commitment to community and belonging is the marketplace application for people who have been entrusted with the gospel.²⁷

Thus, we need both conviction and boundaries for the sake of theological integrity, but we also need a spirit of cooperative collaboration to build bridges. Let us trust God to bring a fresh wind of his Spirit to all aspects of urban ministry as we seek, with God’s help, to shepherd people toward community and belonging and beyond to purpose and truth. Will you join me in asking God to revive urban ministry in the 21st century, so Christ-followers can relate to one another in love and mutual respect, thereby inspiring true fellowship and genuine community? We pray that these efforts will bear fruit for God’s Kingdom as we seek to work faithfully to advance the gospel, bringing renewal to the churches, particularly those in urban contexts, the larger evangelical world, and the work of the gospel ministry around the globe.

NOTES

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