

According to the forward to the United Nations' New Urban Agenda, 'we have reached a critical point in understanding that cities can be the source of solutions to, rather than the cause of, the challenges that our world is facing today.' Sustainable Development Goal 11 challenges the world to make cities 'inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.'

In light of the bleak message about the city in Ellul's *Meaning of the City*, is it conceivable, achievable, or advisable to commit ourselves to urban renewal and hope? Do the less fully-developed allusions to the cities of refuge, the founding of Jerusalem, the vision of New Jerusalem or the commission to 'seek the welfare of the city' (Jeremiah 29:7) provide any hope or is urban renewal a misguided illusion?

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Ellul's analysis of the city makes three propositions. First, commencing with Cain, cities have ever been humanity's attempt to recreate the world in their own image to the total exclusion of God. Cities represent a rebellion against God and a refusal to trust Him. Second, the city has a demonic spirit separate from its inhabitants. Third, the city is a place of death for humanity. In this paper I want to use Ellul's analysis of the city to consider the human experience of shame, to illuminate Hebrews 11 to 13 which Ellul doesn't appear to refer to in *The Meaning of the City*, and to consider the commission to seek the welfare of the city as a means to achieving urban renewal.

Ellul tells us that man's greatest work is the city.¹ There is food, art, music, culture and architecture. It is where the intelligentsia reside.² To paraphrase, the city is good for food, it is a delight to the eyes and it is desired to make one wise. It sounds exactly like the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which God forbade Adam and Eve to eat from. When they did eat, what was the great revelation? Shame.³ Before the fall Adam and Eve were naked and not ashamed.⁴ After the fall Adam and Eve hid from God out of fear because they knew they were naked.⁵ Shame as well as sin had entered the world. The spirit of the city presents the city as good for food, a delight to the eyes and desirable for wisdom. And just like the tree in Eden, which is not in the new Jerusalem, what the city truly represents is shame and death. In the language of Ellul's dialectic we may say that the reality of the city is pride; the truth is shame.

The Oxford Dictionary includes in its definition of shame: 'feeling of humiliation excited by a consciousness of ... shortcoming.' A more succinct definition is: shame is the feeling of being something wrong.⁶ Cain refused to accept his punishment for murder and to trust God's mark to protect him. He believed the judgement was shameful. He built a city to blot

¹ Ellul, J., translated by D. Pardee, *The Meaning of the City*, Wipf & Stock (2011), 154 ('The City').

² See generally Ellul's comments in *The City* at 154 -158.

³ Genesis 3:10.

⁴ Genesis 2:25.

⁵ Genesis 3:10.

⁶ See <https://psychcentral.com/lib/shame-the-quintessential-emotion/> and its brief description of the effect of shame on human behaviour.

out his shame. Hebrews 11 is the counter narrative commencing with Abel. The writer tells us in verse 13 that ‘these,’ which I understand to be a reference to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac and Jacob, died in faith acknowledging they were strangers and exiles on the earth. They had opportunities to return to their homeland but instead they kept searching for a better country, a heavenly one, looking forward to a city, not a promised land, whose builder and maker is God⁷ and then we have the rather curious statement: ‘Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.’⁸ Why would God be ashamed of them? Hebrews describes the faithful as going about in skins of sheep and goats, ‘destitute, afflicted, ill-treated ... wandering over deserts and mountains and in dens and caves of the earth.’⁹ In our societies such people are regarded with a mixture of contempt, derision and condescension. Their lifestyle is regarded as shameful. However, the faithful accepted the wandering Cain was condemned to but they trusted God to provide the city rather than founding their own. And God was not requiring of His people anything that He had not taken upon Himself. As He told Nathan the prophet ‘I have been moving about in a tent for my dwelling.’¹⁰ God permitted Solomon to build a house for His name, not for His dwelling.¹¹ God is not ashamed of the wanderings of the patriarchs and Sarah; He adopted their experience at Mount Sinai when he mandated the construction of the portable Tabernacle.¹² Yet Hebrews indicates that God chose the city as the final destination for His people even before He mandated the Tabernacle.¹³ God ‘wandered’ as His people wandered. His Son wandered while on earth.¹⁴ The wandering will end. God will end it and He will make for Himself a dwelling place with His people in a city He has prepared for them just as He originally prepared the dwelling place for Himself and humanity in the garden of Eden.¹⁵ In the new city He will put an end to shame. His people will be exactly as He created them to be in perfect relationship with Him. There will be no more tears, mourning, crying or pain.¹⁶ Wandering represented judgement for Cain but eternal rest for the faithful.

In Hebrews 13:13 we are commanded to go to Christ outside the camp. This harks back to the period of the Exodus when anyone who sought the Lord would go out to the tent of meeting which was outside the camp.¹⁷ When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and the Lord would speak with Moses ‘face to face as a man speaks to his friend.’¹⁸ God told David ‘I chose no city in all the tribes of Israel in which to build a house, that my name might be there; but I chose David to be over my people Israel.’¹⁹ God chose David, not a Temple. He spoke to Moses as a friend in a tent. He chose relationship not an

⁷ Hebrews 11:10; 13-16.

⁸ Hebrews 11:16.

⁹ Hebrews 11:37-38.

¹⁰ 2 Samuel 7:6.

¹¹ 2 Samuel 7:13.

¹² Exodus 26.

¹³ Hebrews 11:16 referring to God having prepared a city for the patriarchs and Sarah well before the time of the Exodus.

¹⁴ See the discussion in *The City*, 120-124.

¹⁵ Genesis 2:8.

¹⁶ Revelation 21:4.

¹⁷ Exodus 33:7.

¹⁸ Exodus 33:9-11.

¹⁹ 1 Kings 8:16.

edifice. The New Testament command to go to Jesus outside the camp is a call to seek the Lord and find a holy, almighty, glorious friend who intimately knows what it is to be human, who sympathises with our weaknesses, who knows what it is to be tempted, who desires relationship with us and who loves us. But like Moses, we don't stay outside the camp. The description of the faithful in Hebrews 11 is not a call to wander over the face of the earth but an encouragement to persevere. Very few of us will experience the physical wanderings of the faithful described in Hebrews 11 but Peter reminds us that we are still aliens and exiles in this world.²⁰ The call to persevere set out in Hebrews 12 and the list of practical activities Christians are to engage in listed in Hebrews 13:1-5 necessarily involves us living in the city. In recalling the suffering of the Hebrew Christians in chapter 10, the public exposure to abuse and affliction, the plundering of their property, the writer doesn't tell the Christians to flee the city or retreat to the desert to live in a Christian ghetto. The writer says we are not those who shrink back and are destroyed. We are those who have faith and keep our souls²¹ from the deception of the city. That deception tells us we have everything to be proud of even as the spirit of the city continually accuses. Every human being experiences shame; every human being in some way senses that something is wrong with them. What is wrong is the sin that separates us from our creator. So humanity builds their beautiful cities, pushes God out and tells themselves they have everything to be proud of. The spirit of the city encourages this; it wants God excluded. At the same time the spirit of the city constantly reminds every person that they are shameful. The demonic spirit delights in the way shame controls and dictates human behaviour because it seeks to destroy. The spirit of the city not only excludes God, but it destroys humanity. The demonic power of the city does not work with humanity in a joint enterprise to rebel against God. The demonic power is at enmity with humanity.²² It is the great accuser. God never wanted a human edifice or city built for Himself. He knows the fundamental problem in cities is human relationships not buildings. God knows that all people desire a city. Cain and godless humanity founded their own. The faithful search for the one God has built. This innate desire for a city is a desire for community and relationship, a desire to belong and be accepted. It's an innate desire because deep down every person has a sense that something is wrong with them and therefore they can't truly belong; they can't truly be accepted. Only God can provide the perfect, inclusive city when He has once and for all dealt with sin and restored His people to what they were created to be: people living in community without shame.

According to the forward to the United Nation's New Urban Agenda:²³ 'we have reached a critical point in understanding that cities can be the source of solutions to, rather than the cause of, the challenges that our world is facing today.'²⁴ The New Urban Agenda

²⁰ 1 Peter 2:11.

²¹ Hebrews 10:39.

²² Genesis 3:15.

²³ A copy of the UN Urban Agenda in English can be accessed at <http://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/NUA-English.pdf>. A copy in French can be accessed at <http://habitat3.org/wp-content/uploads/NUA-French.pdf>.

²⁴ United Nations, *New Urban Agenda*, 2017, iv.

contributes to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 11 ('SDG11').²⁵ SDG11 simply states: make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

In the New Urban Agenda 'inclusive' means that people of all ages, genders, ethnicities, cultures, social status, lifestyles and abilities are able to inhabit and fully participate in all aspects of city life. 'Safe' speaks to issues of security, particularly for women and girls. 'Resilient' is used in the context of adapting to climate change, mitigating the effects of climate change and recovering from disasters, whether natural such as floods and drought, or manmade such as war and other forms of violence. 'Sustainable' speaks to issues of environmental management, housing, food and water security, health, education, decent jobs for all and lifting people out of poverty. Cities can never attain these goals while people experience shame. SDG 11 does not deal with the real problem of human existence, namely, humanity's shattered relationship with its creator. Ellul's bleak assessment of the city suggests that there is no hope for the United Nation's New Urban Agenda or cities more generally.

So is there any hope? In calling us outside the camp, the writer to the Hebrews calls us to exercise a priestly function of continually offering up sacrifices of praise to God.²⁶ Peter tells us that we are 'a royal priesthood, a holy nation to declare God's wonderful deeds.'²⁷ The church is being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God.²⁸ This harks back to the role of the Levitical priest who interceded on behalf of Israel. Paul commands Timothy:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved to come to the knowledge of the truth.²⁹

The New Testament commands are a call to the church to embrace its priestly role and actively pray for those who have the power and capacity to affect the welfare of the city. It's 'first of all.' It's urgent. It's not dissimilar to God's command to the Israelite exiles through Jeremiah to 'seek the welfare of the city ... and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.'³⁰ 'Seek' suggests actively searching for its welfare. Neither Jeremiah nor Paul are calling us to a life of privation or exclusion nor is the writer to the Hebrews who calls us to 'strive for peace with all men.'³¹ God has called us to perform a priestly function of intercession on behalf of the inhabitants of the city because God desires all humanity be saved. The demonic spirit of the city has been defeated but is still capable of great harm; it constantly accuses. The only counter to the spirit of the city is the Holy Spirit

²⁵ Ibid, 4 [9].

²⁶ Hebrews 13:16.

²⁷ 1 Peter 2:9.

²⁸ 1 Peter 2:5.

²⁹ 1 Timothy 2:1-4.

³⁰ Jeremiah 29:7.

³¹ Hebrews 12:14.

which dwells in each believer. John reminds us that he who is in us is greater than he who is in the world.³² Cain was given a mark for protection as he wandered. Christians are given the Holy Spirit. In performing their priestly role of intercession on behalf of the city, Christians engage in urban renewal and hope. The call to pray for the welfare of the city is a call to actively and urgently pray for peace so we can go about the business of being faithful witnesses for God desires that all be saved and come to know the truth. That truth includes the fact that the cities on this earth are not our final resting place. Ultimately there is no peace, there is no rest and there is no complete dwelling with God until He provides His city. Hebrews picks up on this notion of rest.³³ Hebrews 4 makes it clear that the 'sabbath rest' is a future event.³⁴ That rest is the new Jerusalem where both God and His people cease their wandering.

Jeremiah gives further instruction: 'Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage ...'³⁵ These activities describe community, relationship and love. Communities of love thrive where there is peace and respect. Ellul has noted that one of the characteristics of the city is violence.³⁶ Peace is the opposite of violence. Peace is the opposite of lawlessness, John's definition of sin.³⁷ In praying for the welfare of the city, we ask God to rein in the power of the spirit of the city, we ask God to take away the power of shame and replace it with hope. In so doing, we pray for urban renewal. Where there is peace, love and respect there are communities which are inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable; communities of relationship and grace existing within the killing machine that is the city. Communities where people can be vulnerable. Communities where people don't have to hurt one another and lie to hide their shame. Communities where everyone is accepted, respected and forgiven. Communities where people meet Jesus. In such communities people confront the reality of shame and learn the truth about shame, namely: whatever they have done or had done to them, whatever sense of wrong they feel, Christ has dealt with it. They don't need to be defeated by the accusations of the spirit of the city because they have hope. They don't need to be controlled by shame because Christ has dealt with it. Such communities are inclusive, safe and resilient. People in such communities can persevere knowing this life is not all there is. They find support to resist the demonic power of the city. They show humanity that there is a way to survive, indeed thrive, even in the city. Christ didn't leave an instruction manual on how to live in the city because in the hands of humanity it would become an instrument to accuse and condemn, just another way for the spirit of the city to hammer home the message of shame. God never desired shame for his creation. He did not plan a shameful existence for humanity and a day is coming when that shameful existence will end. However, we must be careful not to give false hope. Until God provides the new Jerusalem there will always be challenges, difficulties, despair, distress and death. That needs to be acknowledged. No human city, no human community will ever

³² 1 John 4:4

³³ Hebrews 3 – 4.

³⁴ Hebrews 4:8-9.

³⁵ Jeremiah 29:5 -6.

³⁶ *The City*, 22.

³⁷ 1 John 3:4.

realise the UN's view of a city as a solution to the challenges of the world. We must wait for God to act and as we do, we are commanded to pray.

While the UN's New Urban Agenda has some good ideas it will fail. The goals of SDG11 will not be realised. Urban renewal is not conceivable or achievable without God. As Christians we have within us the Holy Spirit that can counter the spirit of the city which accuses and destroys. We are commanded to pray for the welfare of the city and that is our vehicle for urban renewal and hope. Ellul has the rather gloomy view that the result of Christian witness is either peace, in which case we have 'allowed ourselves to be trapped by Satan's pranks,' or martyrdom.³⁸ Query whether that is correct. Paul commands us to pray that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life.³⁹ Peace may well be an answer to prayer. The call to pray for the welfare of the city is a command. It's urgent because a day is coming when human history will end. It's urgent because God doesn't want people living a shameful, soul destroying existence. It's urgent because the prayers of the faithful can make a difference: God was going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah but at the prayer of Abraham, God was prepared to spare those cities if he could find 10 righteous.⁴⁰ God wants all people to be saved and living with Him in His city. We do not know how God will answer our prayers; we are called simply to pray and that is what we must do. And we do so confidently knowing that our work will not be in vain.⁴¹

³⁸ *The City*, 182.

³⁹ 1 Timothy 2:2.

⁴⁰ Genesis 18:32. See also James 5:16.

⁴¹ 1 Corinthians 15:58.