



Christ and the city

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What does it mean to be an urban Christian? Is the city really the most strategic place for a Christian to live? Or is it something to survive, something to tolerate? Years ago, a theologian named R. Richard Niebuhr wrote a book that many theologians are still talking about today, "Christ and Culture." Harvie Conn, professor of urban ministry at Westminster Seminary, has reworked Niebuhr's models of how the church relates to culture and society in order to highlight the different theological perspectives which control the way urban Christians relate to their city. His ideas are marvelous food for thought for any urban Christian. The first two models are at opposite ends of the spectrum, and are very distinct. The third is in the "mushy middle" between the first two extremes. The final model is the one to which the City Church of Denver will aspire, and which will most likely prove effective in producing cultural transformation in Denver.

Model 1: Christ Against the City

Many Christians blame the city environment itself for the troubles of society. Rural regions and small towns are seen as sacred and humanizing, while cities are secular and dehumanizing per se. This theological perspective expects that ministry in the city can do little to change it, and even expects individual evangelism to be very difficult or impossible. City churches influenced by this model are like "fortresses" which huddle Christians together for warmth in the spiritually cold urban wasteland.

Response: These churches seem to be unaware of what Augustine called "The City of God" - the forces of the Kingdom of God, advancing in every human city. Their pessimism about change ignores not only the Biblical teaching about the presence and spread of the Kingdom of God, but also the historical fact that early Christianity thrived and succeeded largely because it was urban. This kind of "fortress mentality" is fueled, we suspect, by a profound failure to grasp the grace of God. Legalism needs very strong "us vs. them" boundaries and very clear rules and regulations in order to assure our guilty consciences that we are OK.

Model 2: Christ of the City

On the other end of the spectrum is the theological perspective that views all historical movements that work to emancipate the oppressed as the Kingdom of God (whether Christian, non-Christian, or even atheistic.) Here, the church is not seen as a community in which the coming Kingdom begins its fruition in history, but as simply one of many human institutions that must join together and lead humanity toward liberation and freedom. These churches end up simply as "mirrors" of the city, uncritically accepting and reflecting the dominant moral consensus of the city's culture.

Response: While the Christ *Against* the City model ignores "The City of God" and the depth of his grace, the Christ *Of* the City model ignores the presence of "The City of Man" - (the world system of idolatrous rebellion against God) - and the depth of our sin. These churches have lost touch with the need for conversion of heart and life. While the first model misses the *sovereignty* of Christ over all the world, the second model misses the *uniqueness* of

Christ in all the world. The result of this second perspective is a church that is nothing more than a community center, concert hall, or political action group. It has nothing unique or to offer.

Model 3: Christ Above the City

This model sees cities as good, but it neither recognizes nor engages itself very much with the brokenness of the city. Members use the city as an opportunity for self-improvement but give little back to it. These churches do evangelism, and their programs may include "charity" volunteer work - but they do not equip or mobilize members to heal social brokenness through mercy and justice. Neither do they equip their members to transform the culture through their vocations. The result is a very privatized, individualized faith. This model tends to produce a "Christian subculture."

Response: Although the Christ *Above* the City model regards the city more positively than the Christ/Against model, it is still a failure. While it does recognize the uniqueness of Christ and the reality of sin and the need for conversion, it is still ignorant of the presence and power of the Kingdom of God to change both hearts and social structures. This model also tends to see sin as only personal moral lapses, rather than as a systematic, idolatrous reliance upon wealth, beauty, power, or comfort. Thus members may be behaviorally 'pure' but still very worldly in the way they use their time and resources.

Model 4: Christ Transforming the City

Harvie Conn says that the Transformation Model is the most "hopeful about its holistic mission in the city." Why? The other models tend to think of the redemption purchased by Christ individualistically - as simply for the purpose of forgiveness of sins and attaining a place in heaven.

But the Bible tells us that the ultimate purpose of redemption is a completely restored creation. The book of Revelation shows us the final goal of all of Christ's redemptive work - the City of God (Revelation 21:2) which is the restored Garden of Eden (now in urban form) filled with the Tree of Life, healing the nations (Revelation 22:2). The curse of Eden that brought mental, social, and cultural alienation and brokenness is removed in that new city that God is preparing. This is what Christ's redemption was all about: restoration - not simply individual pardon and forgiveness. Thus the Transformational Church seeks to actively engage the culture in every aspect - spiritually, socially and economically - on both an individual and corporate level.

Harvie Conn writes: "Perhaps the best analogy to describe all this is that of a model home. We are God's demonstration community of the rule of Christ in the city. On a tract of earth's land, purchased with the blood of Christ, Jesus the kingdom developer has begun building new housing. As a sample of what will be, he has erected a model home of what will eventually fill the urban neighborhood. He now invites the urban world into that model home to take a look at what will be. The church is the occupant of that model home, inviting neighbors into its open door to Christ. Evangelism is when the signs are up, saying 'Come in and look around.'

"...As citizens of, not survivalists in, this new city within the old city, we see our ownership as the gift of Jesus the Builder (Luke 17:20-21). As residents, not pilgrims, we await the kingdom coming when the Lord returns from his distant country (Luke 19:12). The land is already his...in this model home we live out our new lifestyle, as citizens of the heavenly city that one day will come. We do not abandon our jobs or desert the city that is...We are to

"seek the peace and prosperity of the city" to which God called us in exile (Jeremiah. 29:7). And our agenda of concerns in that seeking becomes as large as the cities where our divine development tracts are found."

Model	Approach to City	Result
Christ/Against	physical and/or cultural withdrawal	"fortress mentality" - no cultural engagement
Christ/Of	uncritical acceptance of city culture	"chameleon" - no transformational power
Christ/Above	"use" city but give little back to it	"Christian ghetto" - minimal cultural impact
Christ/Transforming	spiritual <u>and</u> social engagement	"model home" - demonstrating grace in city