



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Citizens of Another City
(*Cities and Towns*,
pp. 20-27)

Suggested Article:

📖 Blinded
(*Cities and Towns*,
pp. 54-55)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu

Christian Reflection

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Citizens of Another City

Scripture contradicts the modern view that religion is a private affair, something we do in the solitude of our “inner selves.” God creates a new pilgrim people who promote their own laws and patterns of behavior, and resemble nothing so much as a distinct nation. How then do we live as citizens of another city, but sojourners and pilgrims in earthly cities?

Prayer

Almighty God, across the ages you have guided your people through the wilderness, assuring us of a home in your eternal city.

Strengthen us along the way, so that we might not neglect our call to serve the cities and towns where we live.

Help us to trust in your unfailing presence amid all of our fears.

Grant us wisdom to discern your way in this world even as we hope for the next. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 11:13-16

Reflection

If citizenship in “the Heavenly City” sounds like pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by escapism today, it is because we totally miss its stern political bite. It was the sober truth to anxious, persecuted Christians in Rome. That powerful city claimed to be “*the City*, a permanent and ‘eternal’ City,” Georges Florovsky reminds us. “It posed as an ultimate solution of the human problem.” The book of Hebrews responds bluntly: “Here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (13:14).

“The Church was a challenge to the Empire,” Florovsky says, “and the Empire was a stumbling block for the Christians.” Even if the Empire’s power was a forceful threat and an even more potent lure, as God’s faithful witnesses had “desired a better country” (11:16), so must they. As Christ was crucified “outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood,” so must they suffer with him for the good of others (13:12-13).

The early Christians saw the Church as “another city,” Barry Harvey explains. They called it an *ekklesia*, a term for the assembly of the citizens in a city. This was simply the arc of Scripture. “At the heart of the Old Testament we read that the creator of heaven and earth chooses a ‘people’..., secures for them a ‘land’ of their own,” and covenants with them to be “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” that God will rule forever. Though an attempt to entrust the covenant relationship to a human regime eventually fails, “it establishes in the memory of the Jewish people a hope that will burst forth in messianic fervor with Jesus’ pronouncement that the Kingdom of God was drawing near.” Harvey writes, “Through his life, death, and resurrection, God’s messianic rule promised to Abraham and Sarah’s offspring becomes a present reality...through an alternative pattern of communal life, a distinctive set of personal habits and relations, and a different story in terms of which to make sense of all things on earth and under heaven—in short, participation in another city, one that God would set on a hill for all to see and share.”



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To live as though “our citizenship is in heaven” (Philippians 3:20) doesn’t mean that we withdraw into “separate social enclaves,” notes Harvey. Rather, we participate in city life with “a distinctive set of loyalties and loves” and question our city’s organization and policies from another perspective. We seek the common good “according to a faith, love and hope that is different from those affirmed by the citizens of the earthly city which is governed by the *libido dominandi*, the lust to mastery.... [We] acquire those virtues that will allow [us] to use prudently those earthly goods that are necessary to life in this age, directing this use towards that alone which can truly be called peace....”

Study Questions

1. What did early Christians mean when they called the Church an *ekklesia* (see Matthew 16:18; 18:17; and Ephesians 3:8-10)? What were the political implications of this term?
2. How, according to Harvey, have religion and politics been separated in modernity? Discuss his paradoxical claim that “The formative images in the biblical story [have] relatively little resembling what we call ‘religion.’”
3. What is more important in describing an individual American’s views in the socio-political realm – ideological labels like “liberal” or “conservative,” political party affiliation, or his or her membership in a specific religious community? Give some examples.
4. What are the major obstacles to Christians today “thinking outside the box” of political parties’ platforms or conservative and liberal ideologies?
5. On Heidi Hornik’s interpretation, how did Pieter Bruegel I [the Elder] depict the relation between the Church and earthly communities in *The Blind Leading the Blind*?

Departing Hymn: “One Holy Church of God Appears”

One holy Church of God appears
through every age and race,
unwasted by the lapse of years,
unchanged by changing place.

From oldest time, on farthest shores,
beneath the pine or palm,
one unseen Presence she adores,
with silence, or with psalm.

The truth is her prophetic gift,
the soul her sacred page;
and feet on mercy’s errands swift
do make her pilgrimage.

O living Church, your errand speed,
fulfill your task sublime;
with Bread of Life earth’s hungers feed;
redeem the evil time!

Samuel Longfellow (1864), alt.

Suggested Tunes: ST. JAMES or ST. ANNE

Citizens of Another City

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 2, 3, and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore the political implications of seeing the Church as “another city.”
2. To understand how this view is implied in both the greater biblical narrative and the New Testament description of the Church as an *ekklesia*.
3. To consider how this view stands opposed to the privatization of religion in modernity.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Cities and Towns (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “One Holy Church of God Appears” locate one of the familiar tunes ST. JAMES or ST. ANNE in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Quote

In Augustine’s inclusive urban vision, Christians are at once citizens of another city – the City of God or the Heavenly City – and pilgrims who care for their earthly cities and towns:

[While] this Heavenly City is a pilgrim on earth, she summons citizens of all nations and every tongue, and brings together a society of pilgrims in which no attention is paid to any differences in the customs, laws, and institutions by which earthly peace is achieved or maintained. She does not rescind or destroy these things, however. For whatever differences there are among the various nations, these all tend towards the same end of earthly peace. Thus, she preserves and follows them, provided only that they do not impede the religion by which we are taught that the one supreme and true God is to be worshipped.... Indeed, she directs that earthly peace towards heavenly peace: towards the peace...[that] is a perfectly ordered and perfectly harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God, and of one another in God.... This [heavenly] peace the Heavenly City possesses in faith while on its pilgrimage, and by this faith it lives righteously, directing towards the attainment of that peace every good act which it performs either for God, or – since the city’s life is inevitably a social one – for neighbour” (Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, Book XIX, Chapter 18, translated by Robert Dyson).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading responsively the prayer in the study guide; the leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Hebrews 11:13-16 from a modern translation.

Reflection

In our study of *Cities and Towns*, it is appropriate to examine why the early Christians described themselves as “citizens of another city.” They were expressing high regard for the *polis*, or city, as the context for human flourishing, and they were rejecting the claims by earthly cities for their ultimate allegiance. They identified the Church as the political community where we are formed in the virtues that we need to seek and realize our highest good.

This has rich implications for understanding the Church's role in society. As Christians, we should neither withdraw from the earthly city's public affairs as though our discipleship were a private matter, nor try to dominate the slots of leadership so that the city will run smoothly. Together we should learn to "think outside the box" of any ideology or political party allegiance—so that we are not conformed to this world, but transformed by the renewing of our minds.

Study Questions

1. *Ekklesia*, a term for the gathering of citizens from their homes (literally, the "called out") to deliberate on city affairs, is used 115 times in the New Testament to name the Church or a congregation. It was a political institution, in the ancient view of politics as "the art of human community, the *telos* or end of which is living well, that is, in accordance with our highest good as rational beings. Political institutions are a principal means to this end, tasked with cultivating activities and habits that will direct women and men toward that which gives life its meaning, its purpose." Christians are citizens of another city, the *Ekklesia*, given by Christ and tasked with discerning the good, so that the world might know God's rich wisdom and love.
2. John Locke (1632-1704) distinguished religion ("a Concernment for the Interest of Mens [*sic*] Souls") from politics ("a Care of the Commonwealth"). Politics concerns the nation-state, which has, as the only recognized form of political association, final authority over the actions of citizens. "Yet, because this modern view also excludes any substantive conception of the common good, it reduces politics to procedures for protecting and promoting the pursuit of individual self-interest in the marketplace of desire and consumption," says Harvey. Religion is reduced to "private beliefs about what individuals see as ultimately true and important in their lives"—views about matters beyond "the world of eating and drinking, passing laws and prosecuting offenders, acquiring and disposing of property, making war and making peace, and producing and exchanging consumer goods. Such matters have been handed over to the purview of the state (in conjunction with the market)." Harvey objects that the Bible does not limit God's reign to private beliefs or cultivation of inner selves.
3. Encourage members to discuss how they classify views on "social" issues (e.g., abortion, homosexuality, war, capital punishment, gender roles, sex education, and moral education) and "political" issues (e.g., tax policies, welfare reform, energy policy, environmental conservation, the role of global corporations, and immigration policies). Once we learn a person's views on several of these issues, how do we estimate his or her views on the others?
4. One obstacle is the modern idea that religion concerns only private beliefs and cultivating inner selves: as a result, political and social issues are not discussed openly in congregations or in Christian literature, and thoughtful religious beliefs are rarely deployed in public discussions, magazines, books, and TV. Another obstacle is the "politicization" of issues—the simplifying, distorting, and reframing of their discussion in order to gain short-term political advantage. Also, many Christians know very little about the Bible and their own heritage of political and social theology. "Thinking outside the box" is not just in the head, but also in the habits of the heart. How can congregations help form the virtues of intellectual humility, obedience, studiousness, patience, and love that we need to consider issues well?
5. Because a church steeple appears in the background between the leader and his "followers," some interpreters think that Bruegel depicts the Church as leading people away from community and the common good. Hornik questions this reading, which is suspiciously modern in its view that religion contributes nothing good in politics. Given Bruegel's sympathy for peasants and the details of this composition—"the peasants are being led away from the village *and* the church"—she suggests the artist "is warning us of the peer pressure that can lead us away from the community, the common good, and faithfulness to God."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.