



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Salt in the City
(*Cities and Towns*,
pp. 69-73)

Suggested Articles:

📖 Moving to the
Carpenter's House
(*Cities and Towns*,
pp. 64-68)

📖 Restoring Urban
Communities
(*Cities and Towns*,
pp. 89-93)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to
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Christian Reflection

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Salt in the City

In Elisha's work of mercy for stricken Jericho and Jeremiah's commitment to captured Anathoth, we glimpse God restoring cities and towns. These prophets inspire us to become "saltier" disciples, reclaiming communities with holistic ministry to individuals and well-considered structural reform.

Prayer†

Heavenly Father, in your Word you have given us a vision of that holy City to which the nations of the world bring their glory: Behold and visit, we pray, the cities of the earth. Renew the ties of mutual regard which form our civic life. Send us honest and able leaders. Enable us to eliminate poverty, prejudice, and oppression, that peace may prevail with righteousness, and justice with order, and that men and women from different cultures and with differing talents may find with one another the fulfillment of their humanity; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Joshua 6:26; 2 Kings 2:19-22

Reflection

Jericho was "a city under a curse, with a river of death flowing into it. The city's water source was polluted and harmful, bringing sickness, death, and barrenness," writes Amy Sherman. When the people asked Elisha (whose name means "God saves") for help, "God responds mercifully and definitively through the prophet. The waters of death are transformed for good."

Sherman discerns a pattern for how God wants to work through us to restore communities. It's no accident that "the agency of the healing...is salt," she thinks. "Salt tossed into a river is by definition self-sacrificing. It hits the water and dissolves. We might say that it gives up or pours out its life." To engage in urban transformation today as Christ's disciples, "the salt of the earth" (Matthew 5:13), will be costly — not only in money, but also in time and emotional energy. "Because of this, too many congregations do not get engaged in work that actually moves people out of poverty — as opposed to helping them manage their hardships a little better," she notes. "We are too eager to help the poor but not willing enough to know them." But saltier congregations will move beyond mere relief efforts to

- ▶ *form a true partnership with urban neighbors.* Notice how the people of Jericho cite a positive feature of their city — it is "well situated" — before they describe its problem. "That kind of 'asset focus' is often missing from a typical church's view of its city.... We think in categories of 'ministry to' or 'ministry in' the city, instead of 'ministry with.' We see needs, but fail to recognize the assets God already has in place — people, facilities, and neighborhood associations," Sherman laments. "But an asset-based approach is vital if congregations are to avoid paternalism and arrogance."
- ▶ *invest "foolishly for God."* Like the order for Jeremiah to purchase a field in enemy-occupied Anathoth (Jeremiah 32), so "God sometimes calls us to make what appear to the world as foolish investments," says Sherman. In the Christian Community Devel-



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opment Association, for example, members practice “the three R’s” — relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution — by moving “their homes to neighborhoods that have been devastated by racism, poverty, and economic inequality, for it is only by living and working close proximity with people that we can be reconciled to them,” Lissa Schwander notes. “Yet Christian community development is not a job for heroic individuals and isolated families. Rather it is most effectively accomplished in partnership with local congregations situated within the communities they seek to develop.”

- ▶ *provide a taste of God’s kingdom.* Jesus inaugurated God’s kingdom, yet “we patiently long in our still-broken world for its full consummation,” concludes Sherman. “But while we wait, it is the task of the Church — Christ’s Body — to continue to proclaim the good news of the kingdom and, through our actions, to give people foretastes of it. ‘Urban ministry’ is nothing less than laboring with our neighbors in the kingdom works of justice, love, and healing, to the end that our cities might grow to look more like the New City.”

Study Questions

1. Respond to Roger Greenway’s claim: “The question of where one selects a home and establishes residence is a religious question.” Must we live in a city to care actively for the city?
2. For Christian individuals and families, what are some of the biggest obstacles to moving back into a city neighborhood?
3. In Nathan Corbitt and Vivian Nix-Early’s Arts in Redemptive Transformation (A.R.T.) model, how can local artists help urban communities glimpse “the NU JERUZ”?
4. In John Newton’s “Glorious Things of You are Spoken,” how can the vision of the New Jerusalem give content to and help motivate our concern for the cities of the earth?

Departing Hymn: “Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken” (verses 1 and 2)

Glorious things of thee are spoken,
Zion, city of our God!
God, whose word cannot be broken,
formed thee for a blest abode.
On the Rock of Ages founded,
what can shake thy sure repose?
With salvation’s walls surrounded,
thou mayest smile at all thy foes.

See, the streams of living waters,
springing from eternal love,
well supply thy sons and daughters,
and all fear of want remove.
Who can faint, while such a river
ever flows their thirst t’ assuage?
Grace, which like our God, the Giver,
never fails from age to age.

John Newton (1779), alt.

Suggested Tunes: AUSTRIA (Haydn) or ABBOT’S LEIGH

† Reprinted from *Book of Common Prayer* (1979)

Salt in the City

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Joshua 6:26; 2 Kings 2:19-22	Jeremiah 32
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Reflection (all sections)	Returning/staying in a city neighborhood
Questions 1, 2, and 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 4	Questions 2 and 3
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand “urban ministry” as a calling to reenter the life of urban neighborhoods.
2. To consider the obstacles faced by Christian individuals and families who are called by God to move back into urban neighborhoods.
3. To explore how a vision of the New Jerusalem gives shape to and motivates our concern for the earthly cities where we live.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 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 articles before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Glorious Things of You Are Spoken” locate one of the familiar tunes, AUSTRIA (Haydn) or ABBOT’S LEIGH, in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

“Christians are not their own, but they belong to God, and the Lord has assignments for all his servants. The question of where one selects a home and establishes residence is a religious question,” writes the urban missiologist Roger Greenway. “It must not only be compatible with, but a result of one’s understanding of God’s will for his life and the task God expects him to carry out in the society.... To the extent in which individuals, families, and churches are convinced that urban presence is God’s will for them, they will accept the challenge to remain in the city and bear witness there” (quoted in *Cities and Towns*, p. 63).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Joshua 6:26; and 2 Kings 2:19-22 from a modern translation.

Reflection

Drawing upon her reading of the stories about Elisha and Jeremiah, Amy Sherman offers guidance and inspiration for Christians who are called to live and minister in an urban neighborhood. She agrees with Lee Hardy’s idea that in order to restore shalom in our cities, Christians must “rediscover urban neighborhoods, live in them if possible, and try to make them once again good places for others to live” (*Cities and Towns*, p. 18).

In a supplemental article, “Moving to the Carpenter’s House,” Elizabeth Benton describes how her ‘downsizing’ congregation discovered opportunities for ministry and deeper Christian commitment in its neighborhood. In “Restoring Urban Communities,” Lissa Schwander provides other helpful examples and resources for individuals, families, and congregations.

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one, review the story of Elisha in Jericho and begin to explore the community assets and ministry needs of a specific urban neighborhood. In the other, discuss Jeremiah’s buying a field in Anathoth (a commentary on Jeremiah 32 by community developers Noel Castella-

nos and Mark R. Gornik is summarized by Sherman on pp. 71-72), and use ideas from the supplemental articles to explore the opportunities and obstacles in your city for Christian individuals and families who relocate to urban neighborhoods.

Study Questions

1. Members may agree that where we live—in this rural area, that town, or that city neighborhood—will shape our opportunities for ministry. Greenway’s full statement (quoted above and in *Cities and Towns*, p. 63), suggests that Christians should settle in a place based on “God’s will for [one’s] life and the task God expects [one] to carry out in the society.”

The stories of Jeremiah and Elisha recognize two dimensions of actively caring for a city. Jeremiah identifies with the stricken community of Anathoth by investing his resources there. Sherman and Schwander give reasons why Christians should relocate to and invest in city neighborhoods: “It is only by living and working close proximity with people that we can be reconciled to them,” Schwander writes; and Sherman laments, “We are too eager to help the poor but not willing enough to know them.” Can members think of other reasons?

On the other hand, Elisha cares for the people of Jericho and solves their problem, but he does not live with them. How can Christians living outside the city core be good neighbors to the city? How can they actively care for it by voting in elections, supporting taxation policies, sharing expertise, and encouraging or financially supporting inner-city congregations?

2. Let members make a personal list of obstacles—for themselves and family members. Some might be job-related—the move might require changing a workplace, job, or career; forgoing a promotion or salary increase; or leaving good colleagues. Others will relate to worship and community—changing church membership and style of worship, leaving neighborhood friends, adapting to a new school. Some will involve lifestyle—living in an apartment rather than a house, walking or using public transportation for shopping, developing new recreational interests. Is the neighborhood safe, affordable, and attractive?

With careful planning, could some obstacles be avoided or offsetting advantages gained? How could a congregation or intentional community in the urban neighborhood help us overcome the obstacles or compensate for the losses? We mistakenly think that Christian discipleship, because it is so *personal*, is also *individualistic*. “Yet Christian community development,” Schwander reminds us, “is not a job for heroic individuals and isolated families.”

3. The A.R.T. model, like other Christian programs for urban restoration, is inspired by a vision of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:1-22:5). Local artists share a vision of the “NU JERUZ” —“not so much a place... [as] a way of living in which all people are empowered to live lives that are full, free, and pleasing to the Creator in all aspects – artistically, economically, culturally, politically, spiritually, environmentally, and socially” – and use this vision to interpret events in the local community. *Prophetic art* “awakens us to a social problem or problems; *agape art* helps “us ‘love our neighbor’ and restore relationships”; and *celebrative art* marks “the victory the community has won.” Corbitt and Nix-Early “stress...it is not the art itself but the process of creating the art and the relationships that result from this process that provide an impetus for community transformation.”
4. John Newton’s original text of five verses is available online at www.cyberhymnal.org. Those who live in God’s city are blest and their peace is unshakable (v. 1); they are filled with life given by God’s unflinching love and grace, and this life fulfills their needs (v. 2); God’s constant presence provides for them (v. 3); they flourish and reign as kings because they put Jesus’ type of love ahead of self-love (v. 4); and this brings joy (v. 5). This vision can inspire us to not give up on our cities and towns, for they can be a foretaste of this loving community.

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.