



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 **Dysfunctional Cities:
Where Did We Go
Wrong?**
(*Cities and Towns*,
pp. 11-19)

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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Dysfunctional Cities: Where Did We Go Wrong?

Many cities are deadzones, warehouses for those too poor to leave. With streets mean and shabby, stores boarded up, and schools closed, they are permeated by fear and despair. Must we choose between deteriorating urban cores and degrading suburban landscapes? Which policy decisions and cultural ideals led to the deeply anti-urban physical form of the suburbs?

Prayer

Merciful God, we confess that we have walked away from the people Jesus came to serve, from the cities where he carried out his ministry.

We have chosen instead to make our home in the isolated places where Jesus retreated for prayer; and even there, our prayers have been mostly for ourselves.

In your infinite mercy, forgive us our sins and set us on the path of true righteousness,
that we may find the joy of our salvation as we seek the welfare of the world around us, especially our city of (name). Amen.

Scripture Reading: Lamentations 5:1, 15-22

Response to the Scripture†

What is the meaning of this city?

Do you huddle together because you love each other?

What will you answer? "We all dwell together

to make money from each other"? or "This is a community"?

Reflection

In order to bring substantial healing to American cities, says Lee Hardy, we must explore where we have gone wrong with the built environment. Since World War II, we have ignored the development of public space in cities and towns. He traces "the deeply anti-urban physical form of the suburbs, especially those built since the 1970s" back to public decisions and cultural ideals:

- ▶ *Uncle Sam's invisible hand.* Since the New Deal, federal loan policies have favored building single-family houses on suburban lots with large setbacks over repairing existing homes or building multifamily units and classic urban row houses. "The FHA downgraded [home values in] traditional urban neighborhoods that were old and dense and that incorporated nonresidential elements such as offices and retail establishments...[or harbored] 'inharmonious racial or nationality groups.'... Federal housing policies virtually guaranteed that the middle class would abandon urban neighborhoods."
- ▶ *two cars in every garage.* The U.S. rail system once was second to none. Yet during the Depression, FDR and the automobile industry dreamed of building interstate highways to provide jobs and enhance car sales. After World War II, while Europe rebuilt its railroads, Eisenhower authorized building 41,000 miles of roadway. Meanwhile in 1922, General Motors began acquiring and dismantling urban rail systems.



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- ▶ *mixed use as taboo*. Zoning codes that once protected residential areas from heavy industry were used in the 1920s to prevent commercial, office, and civic land uses as well and to separate residential types (single-family, duplex, multifamily, etc.). To lower traffic in developed areas, dendritic road systems replaced grids. The result is “the ‘exurb,’ a centerless sprawl that has made the private automobile the only viable mode of transportation, where various land uses – residential, commercial, office, civic, and industrial – are scattered across the countryside, and where most commutes are no longer between edge and center, but from edge to edge.”
- ▶ *every home a country villa*. If all of the above “made the exurb possible,” Hardy says, “the exurb became *probable* only with the push of a cultural ideal that valued the private domestic sphere over the public life of the city.” In England and America, families dreamed of retreating from the industrialized cities to country houses. Victorian evangelicals even believed the suburbs might spur a “reformation of manners” when “the home, as a source of Christian morality, was...physically separated from the evil influences of the city.”

Study Questions

1. How has the built environment in your city or town changed over the last century? Has it become a network of “exurbs”?
2. Which citizens are most disadvantaged when a city becomes an exurb? Why should this be a concern for Christians?
3. Cologne impressed Hardy as a “humane and coherent city.” Have you discovered such cities or towns in your travels?
4. How has the “perennial human tendency to blame evil on one part of creation and seek salvation in another” distorted Christian thinking about the built environment? What “antidote” does Hardy suggest for “this piece of bad theology”?

Departing Hymn: “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life” (verses 1, 2, 5, and 6)

Where cross the crowded ways of life,
where sound the cries of clan and race,
above the noise of selfish strife,
we hear your voice, O Son of man.

In haunts of wretchedness and need,
on shadowed thresholds dark with fears,
from paths where hide the lures of greed,
we catch the vision of your tears.

O Savior, from the mountainside,
make haste to heal these hearts of pain;
among these restless throngs abide;
O, tread the city’s streets again.

Till sons of men shall learn your love,
and follow where your feet have trod;
till, glorious from your heaven above,
shall come the city of our God!

Frank Mason North (1903)
Tune: GERMANY

† T. S. Eliot, “Choruses from *THE ROCK*” (1934)

Dysfunctional Cities: Where Did We Go Wrong?

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Response to Scripture	Response to Scripture
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore the public policies and cultural ideals that led to the deeply anti-urban physical form of the suburbs.
2. To discuss the features of a “humane and coherent” urban environment and understand which citizens are most disadvantaged by the development of an “exurb.”
3. To consider how a badly distorted form of Christian theology, twisted with sentimentality for family life, has encouraged many people to abandon urban neighborhoods.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 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 before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life” locate the familiar tune GERMAN-
NY in your church’s hymnal or on the web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Comment

The influential urbanist Jane Jacobs once noted, “Whenever and wherever societies have flourished and prospered rather than stagnated and decayed, creative and workable cities have been at the core of the phenomenon; they have pulled their weight and more. It is the same still. Decaying cities, declining economies, and mounting social troubles travel together. The combination is not coincidental” [Jane Jacobs, “Forward to the Modern Library Edition,” *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961; Modern Library Edition, 1993), xvi].

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 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 Lamentations 5:1, 15-22 from a modern translation.

Response to Scripture

Ask the group to read together these lines of poetry from T. S. Eliot’s “Choruses from *THE ROCK*.”

Reflection

This study guide examines how many American cities became so dysfunctional, with declining urban residential and business districts and increasingly isolated suburbs. Lee Hardy suggests this sinful distortion of our built environment is rooted in public policies and cultural ideals. The solution that he briefly urges – that “Christians rediscover urban neighborhoods, live in them if possible, and try to make them once again good places for others to live” – is explored in two other study guides, “The New Urbanism” and “The Church Building as Sacramental Sign.”

The scripture reading is from the fifth lament in the Book of Lamentations. Written by an anonymous poet in response to the destruction of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans in 587 B.C., this poem describes a joyless city suffering because of past sin. Even though our urban areas have not been destroyed by war, they, like Jerusalem, are suffering because of our neglect of the common good, short-sighted public policies, and faithless fears. We can resonate with the poet's cry, "Restore us to yourself, O Lord, that we may be restored" (5:21a).

Study Questions

1. Encourage members not only to recall how their city or town has changed in their recent memory, but also to brainstorm on what it was like between fifty and one hundred years ago. How was it more pedestrian-friendly than it is today? Were the downtown residential and business districts more or less vibrant than they are now? Did mixed-use neighborhoods exist? How did people commute to work and school and shopping?

When did your city change, and why? Did the public policies and cultural ideals described by Hardy play a role? Were other policies, ideals, or events significant?

Review the description of an exurb in the study guide. August Comte Sectorsky coined the term "exurb" (for "extra-urban") in 1955 to describe the rural bedroom communities that surround cities and are made possible by super highways that link the countryside to city centers. Hardy notes, "If there is any center to this system, it is arguably the home—where all trips originate, and to which they return. That is to say, there are many centers, and they are all private. Public space—built, formed, used, and valued—has virtually disappeared."

2. People who cannot afford an automobile or cannot drive one (the elderly, young, and disabled) are the most disadvantaged citizens in an exurb. Maybe the next most disadvantaged people are the friends and relatives who must care for these by driving them to their appointments. Ask members to perform this thought experiment: from their homes, could they easily attend church, shop for daily groceries, visit a library, obtain government services, attend a public or private school, access entertainment, and go to work without a car? Do they feel safe walking or using public transportation in their own city for these purposes?

We are called to care for the poor, weak, and marginalized members of the community, and not participate, even inadvertently, in the systems that disadvantage them further.

3. Cologne impressed Hardy as a "humane and coherent city" because his family did not need a car. He could ride a bike to the university, and family members could walk just three or four blocks to attend church, go to elementary school, shop for daily needs, and enjoy bookstores and restaurants. "The *Stadtwald*, a ten-mile-long semicircular park that rings the western edge of the city, was just a ten-minute walk along a canal, putting playgrounds, tennis courts, tearooms, lakes with boat rentals, a petting zoo, and ice-cream vendors within our family's pedestrian reach. On weekends we often took the bus downtown. On the plaza before the great Cologne cathedral there was always something free and festive going on—church choirs, street musicians, sidewalk artists, magicians, mimes, and acrobats. There were no neighborhoods to avoid. There were no slums." Where have members found such cities or smaller towns in the states, or elsewhere, in their travels?

A wonderful way to explore and compare the built environment around the world is through aerial photographs and satellite imagery. For example, with an internet connection and free *Google Earth* software (www.earth.google.com), you can study the neighborhoods of Cologne that Hardy describes. Another site, *TerraServer USA* (terraserver.microsoft.com), provides free aerial photographs and topographical maps for cities in the United States.

4. Christians fled the industrialized cities for country cottages, where women and families could foster virtue and piety. Hardy recommends, as an antidote for this sentimental notion, a good dose of "total depravity," the view that "all parts of creation—nature and culture, men and women, reason and emotions, cities and families"—are distorted by the Fall yet "are candidates for restoration in Christ. There is no need to play them off against each other."

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.