

Sidewalks in the Kingdom

By Eric Jacobsen (Brazos Press: Grand Rapids, Michigan) 2003

A Response by Joe Carlson

5 September 2007

But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jeremiah 29:7)

In seeking to continue my studies in how the beauty and richness of the Christian Gospel plays tangible role in our lives, I picked up the book *Sidewalks in the Kingdom: New Urbanism and the Christian Faith*, by Eric O. Jacobsen. It is an excellent book, both in subject and style. Jacobsen is a pastor in a Presbyterian Church in Missoula, Montana, and sets out to critique our modern attitudes toward dwelling places, both the building and the location. This critique begins and ends on the premise that these things matter. What your house, neighborhood, downtown, streets, and sidewalks look like and feel like, matter. They are extensions of you, and share in the testimony that you present to the world. Those outside see Christians in their walk, and understand a great deal about our likes, dislikes, and our priorities simply by seeing and understanding what we call “peripherals.” Much of the modern Church has swallowed the lie that what we do with our lives does not really matter, as long as we show up to church on Sundays, give at the office every so often, and not plan on killing anyone anytime soon. The clothes we wear, the music we listen to, the cars we drive, the houses we build, the neighborhoods we live in, are all external and need not be affected by our faith. But this is a flat lie. The gospel was intended to permeate every fiber of life. It is no longer I who live, but Christ in me. That means Christ drives my car, Christ mows my lawn, Christ buys my groceries at the store. What kind of testimony are we presenting? Whatever we do, we are to do to the glory of God. The best way to understand what someone believes is not to sit down and chat about it. It is to watch how they treat their spouses, what they do if they get cut off on the freeway, what kind of furniture they buy. How a person lives, and makes daily choices, bears witness to their core beliefs. Therefore, if we say we trust in Christ, and owe Him our lives, does it not follow that we live accordingly? Does it not also follow that living accordingly will include every minute of every day, and every activity found therein? The answer is of course. But often saying that, and understanding that that is the way things should be, is far easier than understanding exactly how that is to be done, let alone actually doing it. It is to this end that Jacobsen has written his book. The narrowish subject of cities and dwelling places is his battlefield. He seeks to make war with these modern, dualistic notions, and attacks them head on.

The Problem

Americans have swallowed hook, line, and sinker the notion that we have natural rights to our independence, our individual person, and our wild west idea of freedom. As American Christians we too have tasted of these fruits, and yea they were good to behold. But, as innocent as these concepts may seem on the surface, the forms they have taken are completely unbiblical and present a lifestyle in stark contrast to the way the Bible calls us to live.

In our culture Independence has come to mean autonomy. We are independent of everyone and everything. Therefore I am my own domain, my own castle, my own king. This is seen everywhere, from bumper stickers that say, "Not my president," to the postmodern "dictum" that truth is relative. "I don't need anyone telling me what to do," is a common phrase. The icon of this mentality is John Wayne. He keeps his own law, and delivers justice accordingly. But this is simply unbiblical. We are not our own person in any sense, and never have been. From the beginning we have been born into Adam, and have therefore been slaves to sin, our first nature. We could not ever be independent from that. We are slaves to our first father, the devil. Even as Christians though, we have been liberated for sure, but into dependence and reliance on Christ for everything. This is a truth that cannot not be relegated to Sunday School answer books. This is a truth that shows itself in every aspect of life. Beyond our dependence on Christ, we are dependant on one another. If everyone was completely independent, and lived accordingly, the entire world would be devoid of people after one generation. We need each other for simple survival. God has made the world in such a way that we are interdependent by nature. Whether we recognize this or not, let alone give thanks for it, is another question.

Individualism is a related idol that also has consequences in every aspect of our lives. Jacobsen defines Individualism as, "the doctrine that the interests of the individual should take precedence over the interests of the state or social group." It is from the hard core observance of this 'sacred law' that our churches have been splitting faster than the ends of a woman's hair. My interests are more important than yours. This takes Independence to a new level. Not only does your opinion not matter, it is just wrong. The way I think, the way I perceive the world to be, is not only different from the way you do, it is automatically a better and more accurate picture than the picture your worldview gives. This way of thinking is burning like wildfire in today's church, hence the 400 distinct varieties under the distinct denomination of Baptist alone. We all have been infected by this idolatrous autonomy. It is part of the air we breathe as Americans. There is a reason why TV commercials are so thick with this mentality. It is because it works. We are seduced by the notions that we deserve our big break, we deserve to be healthy, wealthy, and wise, we deserve things done our way, with the tomatoes on the side. Companies play on our feelings of self-importance and self-worth. But Christians *ought* to know better. We know, by God's grace only, that God alone is wise, and above all. Yet we pride ourselves in having a better understanding of Scripture than our Pentecostal brothers, or better Church buildings than the non-denom down the street. But this again is idolatry. On the flip side, Christians are to model the interdependent community that Scripture calls us to. We are called to love one another, submitting to them in all things. We love as Christ did, by laying down our lives for their interests, their desires. The other becomes the focus, and our serving them is the make up of our lives.

The third side of this triangle is our notion of freedom. We have a right to our own personal space. It is ours and no one can influence it, or have a say about it. Freedom used to mean liberation: Liberation from tyranny, from persecution, from injustice. It has now come to mean escapism. Our entertainment industry thrives on our need to be free from our own lives, and live in the make-believe. We live in our suburban homes, drive in our cars, work in

our cubicles, drive home in our cars, eat dinner in the drive through, and slip back into our homes come evening. Because other people are different, and wrong, we would simply rather not deal with them at all. It is easier to deal with difference by ignoring than by confronting. And the interaction we do have with others is completely nominal. Grocery store checkout lines, gas stations operators, and toll booth attendants, are the folks that make up our world. Because our fierce protection of "Personal Space," even interactions in social gatherings like Church, are skin deep. We gain nothing because we risk nothing. But again, this kind of thinking is completely unbiblical. We, the Christian Church, are a society of pilgrims, enjoying the momentary pleasures and dwellings of this life. Our home, our country is a better one, further up and further in. Therefore our lives are not our own. We are not independent from other people, but rather interdependent upon them. We are not a collective of individuals, who are each autonomous in their own mind, but rather a community with love for one another and a mind to submit to and seek the desires of the other first. Likewise we are not a people who have a right to a certain square footage that no one else has a right to. All of life is a gift, and a gift cannot be appreciated outside of sharing. Now before someone cries out "you free lovin' hippie," sharing takes on different forms for different gifts. Obviously I do not share my wife with others in the same way I share my toaster, though both are gifts. Let us suffice to say it takes wisdom to understand what is appropriate for each gift. But as we receive good gifts from our Father in heaven, our first reaction should be gratitude, and our second a desire to give to others. We receive in order to give. We do not receive in order to grasp and cling. This includes our 'personal space.' This does not mean that privacy is unimportant. Again wisdom and discernment accompanies life and the living of it. What we need to break away from however, is that our home is 'OUR HOME: TRESSPASSERS WILL BE SHOT ON SIGHT.' Everything material we have in this world is fleeting, and in the final judgment, unimportant. They are good gifts for us to use and enjoy and find pleasure in, but they are not the end of the story. They are given to us to bless us, and given that we might in turn bless others. This includes our 'personal space.'

The Problem has Fingers

What has all this to do with the title, *Sidewalks in the Kingdom*? Our study has been to understand how our presuppositions toward life, how our belief systems make their way into Tuesday mornings at 8:47, when we are doing the dishes after breakfast. With an understanding of these idols, Jacobsen attacks the primary manifestation of our devotion to these idols, wittingly and unwittingly. There are also a couple outside influences that have aided in shaping our culture to be more vulnerable and susceptible to the idols of Independence, Individualism, and Freedom.

The primary manifestation of our devotion to these idols is our desire to sprawl. Our cities have become bastions of commerce and low income housing, and so families of respectable nature move to the outskirts, where they can dwell in respectability. The outside influences helping this move have been the invention and proliferation of the automobile, and the increased segregating zoning laws that city councils have deemed necessary. First lets grapple with the automobile. The car has become a necessary part of each Americans family. We treat them like children: feeding them, cleaning them, dressing them with stereos, DVD players,

convertible tops, and personal paint jobs. They even have a special room in our houses, built just for them. Sometimes fathers take better care of their car than they do of their actual children. Not all view their car in this way, but everyone has become dependant on them. Because we have grown accustom to the mobility they give us, it has allowed us to move further and further away from places of work, places of worship, and places of recreation. It is easy to jump in the car and drive 15 minutes across town to go to church, or play soccer, or go to work. Hence, suburban sprawl has happened. We live away from the center of community the center of activity, and seclude ourselves in comfortable homes, in the midst of other people secluded in their comfortable homes, not really knowing or caring about each other. The car allows us to travel from the comfort of our garage to the parking garage of our destination without interacting with anyone, except perhaps a toll booth operator, along the way. Our ability to enter into relationship with people has been greatly reduced, if not completely destroyed. The car has fed our appetite for personal independence, allowing us to drive wherever we want, whenever we want, without regard for anyone else. It has fed our appetite for our personal individualism, allowing us to separate ourselves from anyone and everyone we don't want to have contact with. It has fed our appetite for our American notion of 'freedom' or more accurately escapism, allowing us to leave, escape any context that is not comfortable or personally beneficial at the turn of a key.

What has zoning laws done to our society? Zoning originally began has a protection for city dwellers (who was everybody), protecting them from huge industrial machine shops setting up shop right next door. This has morphed over the years to the point where residential areas are completely separate from the center of the city. Residential areas are even segregated to the point where high income housing will never occupy the same block as apartment complexes, let alone habitat for humanity homes. The rich will never live near the poor, and we have allowed that to happen in constructing laws that make sure they never do. Also mixed use neighborhoods have dwindled to almost nothing. A neighborhood that has both single family homes, apartments, grocery stores, sidewalk cafes, and the corner coffee shops, are rare and next to impossible to do with the zoning laws we have placed on our cities. But consider the effects that this has had. By moving into segregated neighborhoods (not racially based, but based on use) we have extracted ourselves from the center of the city. We have also kept the undesirables (the poor, etc) in the city, by not allowing apartments and single family homes to dwell side by side. This has created a very dangerous situation. We have abandoned the poor, leaving them to congregate together. And when sinful people, stricken with poverty congregate together, violent things happen. Thus our cities have become dangerous places to be, giving more incentive to move out. But it is precisely because we have moved out that it is happening in the first place. I am not placing the blame here on anyone and everyone who lives in suburbia. The beginnings of this started 60 years ago, after the war. We were interested in living the "Leave it to Beaver" life, expressing our independence from German terror, living our individually exclusive family lives by means of our cars, and enjoying the 'freedom' we had once again declared in victory by feeding the pockets of Hollywood. No, it is not directly our fault for the way our society is. To a large degree, we are simply reaping what generations past have sown. But the fault does lie with us for living

unaware of the effects this has on our culture, and unwilling to overcome the ways in which our faith has been compromised and hindered by our desertion of the city.

Our Faith and the City

Someone once asked, What hath Jerusalem to do with Athens? Their purpose was to understand what their faith, symbolized by Jerusalem, had to do with the world, symbolized in Athens. Another way to put it is this: What has the City of God to do with the City of Man? Or even more plainly: What has the Church, the body of Jesus Christ, to do with the world, and the cities therein? What role do we play as we live in the world, but not of it? Are we simply pilgrims, biding our time until we die, or Christ comes back? Do we dare put down roots anywhere, for fear of settling in the world? Do we run headlong into the world's arms, knowing that we are saved by grace, and what we do here will be forgiven? Do we think that this life is irrelevant to the afterlife, and live accordingly? Where are our priorities in living in but not of a fallen and dying world?

First we have been called to live here. If it were not so, God would have had us born in heaven, and just cut out all this unnecessary earthly stuff. But God has purpose for us being born here, living here, dying here. He is shaping us, teaching us about Himself, giving us opportunity to grow, mature and become more like Him, through the working of the Spirit. Second, we have been called to preach the gospel to the nations, baptizing them, and teaching them to obey everything we have been commanded. Thirdly, God created this world to be inhabited and filled, as He told Adam and Eve. He created it to be enjoyed and seen as a reflection of who He is, and what He is like. To despise it for any reason, to fear it and flee to the hills, so to speak, is direct disobedience to God's command. "Fill, Multiply, Go, Baptize, Teach," are the commands of God our Father. This cannot be done at the same time as honoring the gods of independence, individualism, and escapist freedom. We fill, multiply, go, baptize, and teach by living interdependent, communal lives based on the notion of the liberating freedom of Christ's blood. Again I am not advocating a hippie commune. There is a time and a place for personal time, family time, for locking the doors. This is simply wisdom. But when we become exclusive and cold in our view toward 'other people' we do violence to our calling as Christians. Man was not created to be alone. Often we take that as simply a need for a spouse, which it is. But once you have a spouse, you don't stop trying to connect with people. You cannot expect to live a Trinitarian life without giving of your self, your goods, your space to others. The Trinity models this love, this selfless, bestowing love for us. We are to live and love in this way. By this love, the world will know that we are disciples of Christ. By this love the nations will be brought into the redeeming folds of Christ's salvation.

This has obvious implications in our lives. Do we view our cars as a means to escape the dying world of our neighborhoods, a way to avoid others? Do we see our houses as places of comfort and safety because we have built thick walls around it, keeping out anyone and everyone who might disturb that feeling of comfort? Where have we placed our idea of Personal Space: on a pedestal or on an altar? What have we been willing to sacrifice for the sake of our faith? In what areas have we not been willing?

Claiming Cities for Christ

With these issues at least addressed and thought about, Jacobsen approaches the city and how these convictions of faith make a difference in our ministry. He makes a distinction which is quite helpful between two camps of Christians. As Jacobsen describes, Christians generally are either Private or Public. What he means by that is this. Private Christians are concerned primarily with the inside, what we believe, what we mean when we say “Our Father.” By Public Christians he means those who are more concerned with the outside manifestation of faith, what we do, in what context do we say “Our Father.” Private Christians focus on teaching the nations, whereas Public Christians focus on bringing them a cup of water, or visiting them in prison. These are not mutually exclusive camps, and an element of both is needed both in the Church and in each individual Christian. But these perspectives each have their different response to the city. The Private Christian views the city as ‘unholy’ and going to burn in Hell someday, and therefore unimportant. What matters are the souls inside, that need to be converted and set aside for Christ. The city itself is a vile place, not fit for respectable Christians. Therefore their efforts are not for the welfare of the city, but for the evangelization of the citizens. Jacobsen says this in response to the Private Christian:

Private Christians would see a city claimed by Christ first and foremost as one where most or all of the population had accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. People would be kind to people on the street, and litter would be reduced, because each of these Christians would be seeking to live holy lives. There would be traffic jams on Sundays as people poured into churches. Bars and strip clubs would be devoid of patrons and would eventually shut down. Jails would be empty...But there would be little consensus about what people would do when they weren't at church once the task of evangelism had been completed. There would be little agreement as to the increase or decrease in the arts, participation in voting, or what communal celebration would be like. This is because Private Christians focus more on conversion than on the salvation of the world and more on avoiding impure behaviors than on engaging in redemptive behaviors.

The Private Christian does not have a grasp on living life in this world. It does not register that God has created the world to be enjoyed, or used, or played with. Public Christians on the other hand, get this. They fail in that they seek to evangelize through these things only and not through the ordained preaching of the Word. They set up social programs and elect themselves to office and try to establish Christian laws and faithful zoning regulations. However, it is ham-handed and ineffective, and it fails because it forces unwanted and unappreciated forms on ungrateful souls. Salvation comes through preachers in pulpits, not through partisans in politics.

What is needed is a balance of these two camps, elements of both approaching the city together. We cannot abandon the city, the central square. We cannot relegate the gospel to the sidelines. Christ must be the Lord of our hearts *and* homes. And He is not just Lord of our homes in some quaint, sentimental, precious moment way. He is King, and that means that He reigns on high. His hand is over all councils, all cabinets, all committees. This is what we

proclaim in the city square. This is what we proclaim from the housetops. If we lived like we believed this we would not fear the city, or avoid it at all costs. Rather we would understand that it is our duty and our calling to live in such a way that the city is claimed for Christ. This does mean evangelizing on the streets, but more importantly it means being a faithful business man, plumber, architect, etc. Whatever your vocational calling, see it as a calling and live like you honored God in your calling. We are a nation of priests, called to offer up our lives as living sacrifices, bringing every thought captive to the Lordship of Christ. We do this Sunday, Monday, Tuesday and through the rest of the week. If we understood everything we did as declaration of our faith, and as a testimony of our faith, our lives would look far different. In turn, how we treat others, both friends and strangers, would overflow with gospel love, and through this Christ-like giving of self to others, cities, states, countries and nations are claimed for Christ.

An important distinction is needed here. In claiming cities for Christ we are not taking the City of Man and rearranging the furniture. The city of Man is torn down, burned, and placed under the ban. What is erected is the city of God. This of course is metaphorical in that we do not actually blow up our cities, kill everyone, including their cows, and move five miles to the west. What it means is that the paradigms with which they approached the city are done away with; paradigms of greed, of self-sufficiency, gluttony, utilitarianism, pragmatism, and autonomy. These worldviews which have led to the building of countless fast food restaurants, ugly strip malls, huge convenience stores, and the like have all contributed to the weakening of our social community, allowing us to hop in the car, drive to a huge warehouse and buy everything we need for our entire lives, without seeing one person we might know apart from that context. This conversation has not even dared bring up the internet which has allowed us to “live life” entirely from the computer chair, even having food delivered to your door. We are losing touch with the people around us, failing to teach our kids proper social etiquette, because we ourselves do not have it. They, in turn, grow up and become the leaders and law makers, and the downward spiral continues. The city of God works from the inside out, but it does work itself outward. Out into the public square, out into the city parks, out into the grocery stores, and out into the places of education. The paradigms we put in the place of those torn down are paradigms of love, self-sacrifice, contentment, playfulness, joy, and selfless submission to God’s will.

Markers of the City

So what should a city look like after the paradigms of Man have been razed, and the City of God has been established? Obviously we are not expecting Heaven on Earth, and acting naively, for we know that sin and sinners are still present, and will be living within the walls. Also we understand that these cities will burn someday, and are not themselves the manifestation of the City of God which is the Church. But if/when the Church has influence in a town, because God has blessed its ministry, what should the town look like? We believe that sidewalks matter, because everything matters, but are we content with believing it, or do we act on that belief? And if we act, what do we do?

Jacobsen outlines six “markers of the city,” which help define what a city should look like. Those six markers are:

1. Public spaces
2. Mixed use Zoning
3. Local economy
4. Beauty and Quality in the built environment
5. Critical Mass
6. Presence of Strangers

Each of these ‘markers’ convey something of what it means to be a city. Without the majority of these six things, we would no longer be dealing with a city. These are therefore the *Sine Quo Non* of a city. The “Without Which, Not’s”, if you will. So how do we understand these items in context of a ‘redeemed city’ (if only in an ‘already not yet’ sort of way)?

Public Spaces: Public spaces are becoming fewer and fewer due to the rise of the automobile. Because we no longer travel with others (generally speaking), sitting next to them, particularly strangers, opportunities for meeting and conversing and interacting with people become less and less. Even in downtown areas, we drive and have a purpose, whether it be a certain store or restaurant. We do not go for the sake of interacting. We go, ironically enough, to hide in the safety and comfort of anonymity. We hide in the masses. We take shelter in the throng. We purposefully limit our ability to ‘bump into’ people, limiting our ability to act and live out our faith in the context of the dying world. We sing with our families, “This Little Light of Mine” from behind locked doors and rolled up windows, as we drive past ghettos and slums. Public spaces are exactly that, spaces where the public is. If we have a desire for incarnational ministry, for reaching out with “Water when I was thirsty” theology, quickening your step through a plaza or choosing to drive when you can reasonably walk the sidewalk, does not further that desire, or give opportunity to experience it. Public spaces give a platform for public discourse. It is in public discourse that evangelism and living testimony work their magic. If we continue to shut ourselves up from the world, no allowing any contact with them, we have misunderstood what it means to “Go, make disciples.”

Mixed use Zoning: The modern ideal is to separate work from living space, errands from place of rest. Now as nice as it is to leave work, and put it behind you by driving fifteen miles into a subdivision, these set up has the dangerous ability to instill in us a form of ungodly dualism. The way things are set up allows us to believe that we have two separate lives, one at the job site in the city, and the other outside the city at home. This dualism has led to countless affairs in the office, the offending couple never once imagining that the two worlds could ever collide. We become two different people, the American “Climb-the-Ladder” Do-it-yourselfer at the job site, and the humble Go-to-Church-on-the-weekends and wave-hi-to-at-least-one-of-your-neighbors guy at home. But are we not created to be working people? Is that not part of who we are as humans? This is part of our make up, and to try to compartmentalize ourselves this drastically can have disastrous effects on our identity. To segregate our lives is to open the door to dishonest living, and confused role playing. On the

other hand, to work and shop and live and play all in the same area, gives credence to the truth that we are working beings. We are public beings. We play a role in the workings of something larger than ourselves; broadly a community, narrowly our particular vocation. To live near your work allows you to be honest with your family about what you do, and who you are in that line of work. You are not given the opportunity to put on your disguise as you drive thirty miles away. That said, these are general principles, and exceptions are abundant. But how often do we think about where we live and play in relation to where we work and shop, and what effect that has on how we perceive ourselves, our families, and our roles in the community? The effect of this thought process, and doing so honestly, is opening our eyes to the whole man. We are completed by the various roles we play, and responsibilities we are given. To say that one role has no affect on the other, or that one responsibility has no relation to the other, is to tear down the walls that keep us functioning as a person. The whole man is who God is interested in redeeming. Not just part.

Local Economy: A common phrase at the local hippie store is “Buy Fresh, Buy Local.” Their purpose is to keep the money spent in the same region where the money is earned, thus supporting local businesses and producers, and perpetuating local economy. This is good and proper for if we want to remain living where we are currently living, our future depends on our present purchasing choices. Do we spend all our money at big corporations where the money is being sent outside the local region? If everyone did that, the city would dry up. As Christians, desiring things like families living near to each other, we need to think of ways we can enable young college grads to make a start. Or giving young married couples opportunities to get on their feet without moving away from church family, and immediate family. What are our values, and how can we live in such a way that those values are realized and made not only possible, but feasible too? Along side these considerations, understand that a local economy is a platform for building long lasting relationships. To stay in an area your whole life, shopping at the same stores, you develop relationships with the proprietors and employees, again, opening the door for long term incarnational ministry. As we get to know our community, we are able to witness and bear testimony in our lives. Living amongst people long term is a far more effective tool for discipleship than fly-by-night street evangelism, though God can use that too. But to come along side someone over the course of decades, that is how God brings growth and maturity to His church. This is all benefited by the support of local economy. If a certain age group cannot live in your area for whatever reason, your community will be devoid of an entire generation of experience and understanding that simply cannot be gained in any other way. We do not want our churches to be either 55 and over clubs, or and glorified youth group. Our job is to enable our local economy to support anybody, from any station of life, whether rich or poor, whether young or old. Through our living together in community, our lives are enriched and blessed, and used of God to bring in the lost sheep.

Beauty and Quality: What place does beauty have in our lives, our cities, our bus stops? Does it matter? Are aesthetic appearances simply nonessential pleasures that are nice if we have them, and unimportant if we don't? How have we answered that question in the past fifty years? It seems that we have said yes, considering the copiousness of modern, pragmatic

architecture. What do we hold valuable? To look around our culture, it would appear that the highest principle, that we define as “value” is this: The Most Product for the Least Money. That principle is what defines our culture. How does that play out in architecture? Well, it means building a box, inexpensively, and filling it to the corners with things to buy. There is no need for ornamentation, because it provides no value to the consumer. What does he care whether or not there are pillars flanking the entrance to his store. Does it mean he can take an extra 10% off? What do we see as most important? Right here, and right now, it’s the “Value Pac” or the “Value Meal” which necessarily means more for less. What do we care if it comes in cardboard boxes, or in cellophane? It’s the end result we are interested in, not the journey or the experience. But let me ask this question. Is that how God works? Does He build His dwellings with a “more-for-less” mentality? Is His architecture simply there to provide a platform for something else, or does it itself tell a story, and take part in the larger story being told by its Maker? Consider the very world we live in. Is there a pragmatic need for every different species of every different genus? Could not have God made something a little less complex with less variables? Of course He could have. He could have made the world with one kind of tree, and on that tree would grow one fruit that contained everything we needed to survive. There would be no need for apples *and* peaches, for kale *and* hearts of romaine. But God did not create that way, because He values more than simply the end result. He could have skipped the whole world all together and created us there in heaven. No suffering, no pain, no death on the cross. But God values the experience and journey of life, and uses it to bring us to places of varying maturity and wisdom. But it is completely unnecessary, from a modern, pragmatic mindset. But praise God, He is not of the modern fabric. But then the question is begged, Why are we? Why do we place “More for less” above aesthetic journey and the experienced beauty? Why do we go out of our way to buy things from a place that has no thought for external beauty and purpose because it provides no “value”? How do we then approach our downtowns, and our civic buildings, our public parks, our sidewalks and streets, our very own homes, dining rooms and bathrooms? My purpose here is not to answer these questions, but to stoke the flames a little and get us thinking about how we honor God in our lives, in the aesthetic qualities of our lives, from the bed we sleep in to the car we drive, to the building we work in. For we are called to be like our Father in Heaven, and think and act like our Lord Jesus would. May the Spirit open our eyes to the aesthetic blindness we have contracted.

Critical Mass: Critical mass is loosely defined in this context as the number of people it takes to make up a community centered around a common bond and goal. In order for ideas to be nurtured, and projects to be completed, and economies to be sustained, more than three people is needed. A critical mass of people is necessary to support public dialogue, community arts, civic activities, and local businesses. This is found in the city. A town of 500 people might be a tight knit community, but it simply cannot facilitate every need the members of that community might have. We see this principle worked out in the Church. It does not work for pastor of a church to have his family as his only congregants. A critical mass is needed to perform the ministry of the Church. Elders, deacons, feet, hands, knees and toes are all needed to make up the body. This means developing that interdependence that we talked about earlier. Community is essential in the work of the Church. There can be no lone-ranger

Christians. Even a single missionary in the heart of the jungle relies on support and prayer from folks back home. We need to first understand and realize our need for interdependent relationships, at home, at church and in the workplace. The next step is to cultivate them in selfless Christ-like way. Through relationships and community, the city of Man is destroyed and the City of God fills its streets.

The Presence of Strangers: The final marker of a city, the final Sine Qua Non, is the presence of people who are unknown to you. We are human and it is obvious factor of our limited finiteness that we cannot know everyone there is to know. There will always be strangers, this side of glory. Even in Heaven, we might not know every last person. Who knows. But strangers are an integral part of our city life. This sometimes can be intimidating given our locale. Sometimes its no big deal and you have the freedom to wave and say hello indiscriminately. Whatever your situation and comfort level, Scripture calls us to certain actions. It does not make exceptions for timidity and cowardice. We are called to love our neighbor, and when Jesus was asked just who that might be, we discovered the answer unsettling. Our neighbor is not simply the guy living next door, or even down the block. It's the complete stranger stranded on the side of the highway with a flat tire. It's the unfamiliar person in front of you at the grocery store checkout. Deuteronomy 10:19 tells us we ourselves were strangers once, and therefore we are to love the stranger in our midst. Jesus confirms this for us New Israel folk, when He gives us His "you gave me a drink when I was thirsty" theology. For when we do it to one of the least of these, we do unto Christ. This type of relationship is a norm in the Christian Faith. Our love is one that works itself outward, toward others. Our love is not that which pleases self, but serves the stranger. Through this love, we go two miles when asked to go one, and give the shirt as well as the jacket. We love in order to bless, and be a blessing. We love in order to bestow. We love in order that the world might know, that the stranger might know that we are disciples of Him who is Love, and that we serve Him with our love for them. Again, through this love, the city of man is emptied, and the city of God expands its walls.

So Then

Where do we go with all of this? As citizens of the City of God we are to act in accordance with our citizenship. This means doing as our Mayor tells us, and in a manner consistent with what He has ordained. It also means enjoying the things He enjoys and enjoying the journey he puts before us. A big first step is recognizing the paradigms we have blinded ourselves with. "More for Less" is not Gospel living. Again, what do we value, and is it what God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit value? Are we willing to look at the Word and compare our thoughts, actions, and worldviews to what we find there, and further, willing to make necessary changes? What effect does the creation account have on our appreciation of the way the world works? Do we enjoy processes, or simply the end product?

Living the full life in appreciation of all God made, and the way He made it calls us to a life of gratitude and love. True gratitude seeks to share, and bestow. True love seeks to die, for the other. True love looks at another first, and values the needs of that other before it's own. And in true gratitude it seeks to bestow and share, with a desire to bless the needs of the other.

Life is full and rich, abundant and overflowing with good things. From sunsets to historic buildings. From city parks to living rooms full of friends. From a nice dinner downtown, to sidewalk conversations. Life is to be lived, but lived in the context of others. We are creatures who depend on one another, and in all things, on our God above. We are not independent cells, separate and alone. Indeed, we necessarily live in community. Let us not despise our context called home, and hometown, by over-valuing escapist tendencies. Freedom in Christ is not the ability to do whatever we please, whenever we please. It is the liberation from slavery to a master whose aim was our destruction. It is also liberation *to* a Master who desires and performs our salvation for eternity, and brings us to a mature life, enjoyed to the max in the here and now. The call is to love. Love life, love family, love friends. Love food, love walks, love good books. Love God above all. Honor Him for who He is, and lift up your hearts in joyful gratitude.