

Hope For the City  
Urban Subversive Fulfilment  
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# Part 1

## Stepping in

## 1 The Need

I'm going to be writing about the need to reach our inner cities and council estates with the good news about Jesus and his death and resurrection. This series of articles arises out of a growing recognition that there is a great and terrible gap in our gospel witness. To be fair, Gospel witness in the UK is, generally speaking, hard work with only a small percentage of people coming to faith and aside from one or two churches, the story often seems to be about maintenance and decline. However, we are doing even worse on our estates and in our inner cities.

### 1.1. Unreached

In his book "Unreached", Tim Chester tells how,

"I once attended a lecture at which the speaker showed a map of my city, Sheffield. The council wards were coloured different shades according to a series of social indicators: educational achievement, household income, benefit recipients, social housing, criminal activity, and so on. Slide after slide showed that the east side of the city was the needy, socially deprived half, compared to the more prosperous west. Where are all the churches? Counting all the various tribes of evangelicalism, the large churches are on the west side. The working class and deprived areas of our cities are not being reached with the gospel."<sup>1</sup>

This is backed up by further statistical research:

"Research conducted by Tearfund in 2007 shows that church going in the UK is a middle - class pursuit. Adults in social grades AB (professionals, senior and middle management) are over-represented among both regular and occasional churchgoers. Meanwhile adults of social grade C2 and D (semi-skilled and unskilled manual) have the highest proportion of non-churched."<sup>2</sup>

If we seem to be seeing any fruit from Gospel work, it often seems to be amongst students and graduates. It is encouraging to hear about growing Christian Unions, of conversions at CU mission events and large churches in university areas. Some of those churches are encouraging church planting as graduates move away from university accommodation into other parts of the city. However, there tends to be a fixed migration into more prosperous and suburban areas. Council estates and inner-city terraces tend to be off the main route.

It is worth remembering that whilst we often hear that about 80% of church members have received university education, only 32.6% of 18 year olds went to University in 2017.<sup>3</sup> This is important. There have been increasing numbers quoted as going into higher education and the Higher Education Initial Participation Rate (HEIPR) annual measure suggests that, on the basis of probability, 49% of the population will enter Higher or Further education by the time they are 30.<sup>4</sup> However, the HEIPR figure is only a probability, not a certainty, and furthermore:

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<sup>1</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 10.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/largest-ever-proportion-uks-18-year-olds-entered-higher-education-2017-ucas-data-reveals> accessed 20/06/2018

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/jun/04/higher-education-participation-data-analysis> accessed 20/6/2018.

“Higher education in this context means every kind of accredited higher education course, from two-year foundation degrees delivered at a local further education college, to PhDs from Cambridge.”<sup>5</sup>

This means that whilst a lot of people will be involved in further education of some kind, not all will attend university and not all will receive degrees. If our focus is predominantly on mission to students and graduates, then we are effectively forgetting about the majority of the population who will never have the opportunity to attend a university mission and are unlikely to find themselves living next door to the graduate church plant member.

## 1.2. Trickle Down?

I believe that the disproportionate make up of our churches is at least partly due bad decisions made, particularly in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Chester comments that the church wasn’t always biased to the prosperous:

“It was not always like this. The Great Awakening was largely a working-class movement. Although its leaders were middle class, the establishment treated their open air preaching with scorn.”<sup>6</sup>

He goes on to suggest the following factors that led to a situation where the church reached an educated elite at the expense of the working classes:

1. The C of E parish system is not geared up for urbanisation.<sup>7</sup>
2. Going to church is seen as for respectable people who dress up in their Sunday best.<sup>8</sup>
3. “The last century has seen an explosion of entertainment opportunities.” The church is no longer the communal focal point.<sup>9</sup>
4. We have focused on strategies of reaching “people of influence” such as students and graduates.<sup>10</sup>
5. Churches are geared up to reaching people through social networks and friendship evangelism which doesn’t fit in with working class people being more tied into local communities.<sup>11</sup>
6. Working class people become Christians and then tend to engage with things that identify them as aspirational leading to a sense of becoming middle class and leaving their community behind.<sup>12</sup>

Some of those factors may seem unavoidable but there are some that we could have done something about. In particular, we need to take note of point 4 – the belief that by focusing on a strategy of reaching those with influence, this would lead to God raising up a generation of church leaders who would ensure that the Gospel went out. Back in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the focus was on reaching public school boys through summer camps targeted at the elite who were expected to go on to Oxbridge and from there to be politicians, captains of Industry, vicars and

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2013/jun/04/higher-education-participation-data-analysis> accessed 20/6/2018.

<sup>6</sup> Chester, *Unreached*,10.

<sup>7</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Chester, *Unreached*,12.

<sup>9</sup> Chester, *Unreached*,12.

<sup>10</sup> Chester, *Unreached*,13.

<sup>11</sup> Chester, *Unreached*,13.

<sup>12</sup> Chester, *Unreached*,13.

bishops. The positive aspect to this is that through such camps men like John Stott, Dick Lucas, David Watson, Nicky Gumbel and our current Archbishop of Canterbury were discipled. The problem was that the church was in effect trusting in “a trickle-down effect” where the gospel would eventually filter down to the masses.

We often associate “trickle-down effect” with economics. This is the concept that if the wealthy are free to get wealthier then there will be a trickle down of that wealth to the middle and working classes so all benefit. This means if you cut taxes at the top, then eventually all will benefit. The approach is particularly associated with Thatcherite and Blairite economics.

The fascinating thing is that when you look at the policies of those associated with trickle down, what they practiced didn't really seem to suggest they really believed in the theory. Now, you may not like their particular political tribes or agree with their policies and you may be suspicious of their motives. However, whether they were right or wrong, they certainly weren't trickle down practitioners.

Margaret Thatcher's government took steps to enable council estate tenants to buy their own homes and the general public to own, and often sell at great profit, shares in large companies. It also cut income tax at the bottom as well as the upper end. In other words, those were attempts at redistribution of wealth directly to people without them having to wait for it to trickle down.

Similarly, Tony Blair, although presenting his government as a friend of business and the rich, oversaw an administration that used tax credits to benefit working families. Thatcher and Blair were followed by the Coalition Government and a massive increase of the income tax threshold. The consequence of this is to reduce the income tax bill of many significantly whilst taking others completely out of the tax system.

Whether these policies were effective is debatable. My point is that their intent displayed an impatience with trickle down. These governments were not waiting for the rich to pass on their wealth and for the benefits of their success to trickle down. These governments were prepared to intervene. The argument was about what type of intervention would be most effective.

What about a trickle-down gospel? Well, just as political and economic radicals rejected trickle-down economics, we see that visionaries in the church have rarely accepted the mission version. William Carey got this when he called the church to mission and headed off for India. He could not wait for the Gospel to trickle out around the world. He went. Similarly, Hudson Taylor was not content to wait for the Gospel to trickle inland from the coast and ports of China but set up China Inland Mission and headed inland with the good news. Of course, they were following in the footsteps of Paul, who was not content to wait for the Gospel to trickle out from Jerusalem, Antioch, Ephesus and Rome, but pioneered the way, heading into unreached territories and setting his sights on Spain.

I believe that when it comes to our estates and inner cities, we cannot wait for the trickle down either. If we desire to see churches full of people from different backgrounds, different classes, cultures, ethnicities then we too need to go to the unreached places where the Gospel is not being heard. I have of course focused primarily on class and education here, but what I say also applies to race as well. We have to confess that we have failed to see the Gospel shared with Muslim background immigrants, that primarily our churches are white and whilst there are many believers from Afro-Caribbean and mainland African backgrounds, our churches are often segregated by colour.

### **1.3.A personal desire**

Our passions often reflect our own backgrounds and are caught not taught. I grew up in South Bradford, a predominantly working-class area. I would not class myself as working class; my dad was degree educated and worked in a professional sector. However, he was the first in his family to go to university and he grew up on a council estate in Derby. My great grandparents were from Italian immigrant stock working in the east end of London: family records show that they signed marriage certificates with a cross, suggesting illiteracy. We went to an inner-city church that had started life as a mission hall intended to reach the down and outs in a notoriously rough area. As Chester intimates in his reasons listed above, many of those reached had gone on to sort their lives out, giving up drink and gambling so that they became prosperous. I attend a comprehensive school on the estate rubbing shoulders with council estate lads and Pakistani background Muslims. I grew up loving the city and desiring to see places like Bradford, Leeds, Sheffield and Birmingham reached with the Gospel.

That's what brought us to the West Midlands to Sandwell, a borough on the edge of the Black Country. It's an area that often features on lists of indicators for social and economic deprivation. The church building is located in an increasingly multicultural area. We share our little bit of the High Street with Kurdish barbers, Iranian tailors, African grocery shops and halal butchers. There are also little clusters of hostels for immigrants awaiting Home Office decisions and men fresh out of prison. At the same time, there are little pockets of prosperity with some desirable areas, especially the closer you get to the officially 'posher' Harborne.

Sarah and I bought a house on the local council estate. It is not one of the roughest estates. In fact, a lot of people would consider it a nice area. However, it is still a council estate and that means it carries its own identity. Sadly, one particular part of that identity is the absence of Gospel witness. Churches border the estate and there's one reasonably active charismatic Baptist church on the next little estate along, but this has not translated into gospel contact where we are. We have, during our time here, worked to build up neighbourly friendships as well as some planned door to door work.

It is my personal desire to see lots of thriving gospel communities on estates like ours and in inner city areas, not just in the West Midlands but across the country, and that's what this series of articles is about.

### **1.4. Stepping In**

The point is this. Unless people are willing to go to our estates and inner cities to share the good news, then how will people hear the Gospel? If The Church mainly made up of white middle class people, then that means for many (if not most of us) it will, in effect, require a form of cross-cultural mission.

## 2 Going Cross Cultural

If we are going to reach Britain with the Gospel, then we need to be equipped for cross cultural mission. You heard me right. We tend to think about cross cultural mission as being what happens when we send missionaries abroad to Asia and Africa.

If we are going to share the gospel, plant and pastor churches here in our own country, it's a lot more straightforward isn't it? We know our culture. We speak the same language, wear similar clothes, watch the same TV programmes, read the same books etc. Surely, all we have to do is meet people, get to know them and tell them about Jesus.

Yet actually, we already know that this is not the case. Over the past 100 years, our cities have seen significant immigration from all around the world. When I walk down our high street, I meet people from Pakistan, Turkey, Jamaica, Nigeria, Brazil, Poland and so on. I meet first generation immigrants from countries and cultures very different to ours who are having to learn English from scratch as well as people from anglophone cultures. Then there are second and third generation descendants of immigrants who find themselves navigating two cultures: that of their parents and grandparents and that of their friends who they've grown up with.

It's not just about immigration too. Whether we like it or not, we have to consider the question of class. In the coming chapters, I'm going to talk a little about working class culture - or cultures. We don't wear the same clothes, read the same books or even newspapers. There are distinctions between middle class and working class culture. It's not quite the same as sending missionaries abroad: these cultures are not separated by distance and so they interact and inform each other, but the distinctions are there.

The urban missionary needs to be aware that they are entering another culture and they enter it bringing their own culture and assumptions with them. I have identified three different types of pastor/planter/evangelist in urban contexts. Each come with their own challenges:

1. The non-indigenous worker. This person very clearly comes from outside. For example, a middle class pastor who has trained at theological college who arrives on the estate would fall into this category. They will bring with them middle class values and preferences. They risk being seen as an outsider and may experience culture shock and rejection. They may also risk confusing their own cultural values with Biblical values and try to impose them on a community. Equally they may be reluctant to challenge the idolatry within the culture for fear of causing offence.
2. The returning indigenous worker. Some pastors, planters and evangelists are returning to estates and inner city contexts, such as where they may have grown up in the city among working class people. Often the journey to pastoral ministry has included university, a professional job and then theological training. They may assume that because they are originally from an estate/inner-city/working class background that they know the culture and can just fit back in. The danger is that they will still be seen as coming from outside the culture, of having become middle class. They may still be blind to their own cultural assumptions.
3. The indigenous worker. We are praying that God will raise up workers who have grown up on our council estates and in our inner city areas. They are more likely to be accepted as part of the community although commitment to the Gospel may still lead to rejection, especially when it forces ethical choices. Whilst they are not bringing in an alien culture under the

misapprehension that it is Gospel culture, they may not be alert to the idolatry within their own culture, seeing it as “normal.”

So, whether or not you are originally from the estate or you have arrived from a different background, we all find ourselves engaging in cross-cultural mission. How do we go about this? Well, this is where the work of JH Bavinck comes in.

### **2.1. JH Bavinck**

JH Bavinck was a Dutch missionary to Indonesia. In 1954, he wrote an important but little known contribution to missiology, translated in 1960 as “An Introduction to the Science of Missions.” It is his thinking in this book that will underpin our approach to urban cross-cultural mission. Our aim in this study is to take his methodology which was originally intended for over-seas mission and use it to think through how we cross cultures with the gospel in our home country context. How does Bavinck help us with urban mission. Before we apply his thoughts, we are going to start by summarising his thinking.

### **2.2. The Science of Missions – Five Big Words**

Bavinck’s work can be summed up with five key words: contextualisation, *posessio*, preaching, *elenctics* and *Subversive-Fulfilment*.

#### Contextualisation

Bavinck was a proponent of contextualisation. He argued that the missionary had to carefully apply themselves to each circumstance. We cannot simply copy Paul’s approach at the Areopagus in every situation.<sup>13</sup>

However, he also rejected as simplistic the notion

“that the content of preaching is given in Scripture but that the manner of preaching and the question of the missionary approach is a matter of personal tact and of applying oneself to the given circumstances.”<sup>14</sup>

In other words, he was not a mere pragmatist. The missionary cannot simply determine for themselves how to dress, speak, live based on the situation. Rather, their whole approach both in terms of style and content has to be shaped by Scripture. He says,

“History, which raps our knuckles mercilessly when we make a mistake, has taught us that the missionary approach does indeed have theological aspects.”<sup>15</sup>

He expands on this challenge by explaining that,

“Missionaries may adopt the way of life of a people, speak their language, associate themselves with the religious concepts, utilize saying derived from the religious literature, and from the standpoint of ethnology or psychology, all this may be excellent. And yet it still may be necessary for theology to issue a warning that such efforts which seek to draw us close to a people must proceed with caution lest they sacrifice the purity of the gospel. On the other hand, it is also possible to have the best intentions and to ignore the cultural

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<sup>13</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 80.

<sup>14</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 80.

<sup>15</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 80.

possessions of a people, and to preach the gospel pure and simple, without any application to their specific characteristics.”<sup>16</sup>

Much of the focus of his book on the science of missions is about negotiating that tightrope carefully.

Even the act of contextualisation itself is not motivated by pragmatic considerations alone but was shaped by a theological understanding of what it means to be human and therefore the nature of the people he was seeking to reach. He explains that,

“Abstract, disembodied and history-less sinners do not exist; only very concrete sinners exist, whose sinful life is determined and characterised by all sorts of cultural and historical factors; by poverty, hunger, superstition, traditions, chronic illness, tribal morality, and thousands of other things.”<sup>17</sup>

This has implications for how we present the Gospel. We cannot just stand up and shout into a vacuum hoping for the best. We need to get to know the people we are preaching or speaking to. Sin is universal and similar but it is also contextualised and specific. The way that the consequences of sin are worked out will differ from person to person and neighbourhood to neighbourhood.

As a good reformed thinker, his missiology was also shaped by his understanding of who God was as well and the implications that had for the nature of the Gospel. Bavinck believed in a living, speaking God and so,

“What is preached, the content of preaching, is not a theory, not a philosophical system, but it is God himself. We are not postmen but ambassadors of Christ.”<sup>18</sup>

This gives a high view of preaching and one-to-one witness; it raises our vision beyond the mundane to see that we are not in the business of merely conveying information or even selling a product or idea. Rather,

“Our preaching is the place where the living Christ encounters a lost and confused mankind.”<sup>19</sup>

It was this high view of preaching that caused Bavinck to take contextualisation so seriously.

### Possessio

As Bavinck introduces us to contextualised mission, he introduces the idea of “*possessio*” which sounds like one of those spells you might learn if you headed off to Hogwarts with Harry Potter. However, it’s nothing to do with spells and potions and everything to do with what it means to engage with another culture for the sake of the Gospel.

Bavinck here is thinking about how a fledgling church responds to the culture around it without being conformed to it. Bavinck asks the question this way:

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<sup>16</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 80.

<sup>17</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 81-82.

<sup>19</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 82.

“To what extent must a new church which has developed within a specific national community accommodate and adjust itself to the customs, practices and mores current among a people?”<sup>20</sup>

A church may choose to be very different from the culture around it, pursuing Biblical godliness. On one level, that seems the right thing to do as it protects the members from idolatry. However, there are two problems with this. First of all, the church may come to be seen as alien from the community in which it has been planted so that people conclude it is not for them but for outsiders. Secondly, we may think that we are being Biblical and culturally neutral when in fact, we are simply replicating the missionary’s home culture.

“By going too far in accommodating themselves, they are in danger of being swept into heathendom. But, by accommodating themselves too little, they can create an unbridgeable gulf between themselves and their countrymen.”<sup>21</sup>

Borrowing from Thaurén, Bavinck offers 6 levels of accommodation to a surrounding culture.<sup>22</sup>

1. “External” e.g. clothes and social niceties
2. “Linguistic”
3. “Aesthetic” – art, architecture etc e.g. a church’s décor
4. “Social and juridicial” (e.g. marriage customs)
5. “Intellectual”: should we “utilize existing philosophical writings and religious hymns, at least to the degree that they contain something of value”?<sup>23</sup>
6. “Religious and Ethical”

He suggests that churches are helped in the decision because whilst many cultural customs have their roots in pagan beliefs, their usage goes so far back in history that they have in fact lost their original meaning.<sup>24</sup> This means that when choosing whether or not to allow a certain practice, “We can seek to determine the proximity that customs and practices sustain to the essence of paganism.”<sup>25</sup>

However, Bavinck wants to push us further in our thinking. Accommodation involves seeking to compromise with the culture around us, when the Gospel challenges us to do something better. This is where *possessio* comes in. As Bavinck explains,

“We would here note that the term ‘accommodation’ is really not appropriate as a description of what actually ought to take place. It points to an adaption to customs and practices essentially foreign to the gospel. Such an adaption can scarcely lead to anything other than a syncretistic entity, a conglomeration of customs that can never form an essential unity. ‘Accommodation’ connotes something of a denial, of a mutilation. We would therefore prefer to use the term *possessio*, to take in possession.”<sup>26</sup>

This means that we neither see cultural practices as pagan or sinful nor neutral and allowable, but rather as things that we take possession of so that the Gospel can transform them for godly

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<sup>20</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 169.

<sup>21</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 170.

<sup>22</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 171.

<sup>23</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 171.

<sup>24</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 174.

<sup>25</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 174.

<sup>26</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 178.

purposes. Our clothes, food, art etc. can either be used in order to worship and glorify God or to worship idols. Possessio is about re-orientating culture towards the worship of the living God.

“Within the framework of the non-Christian life, customs and practices serve idolatrous tendencies and drive a person away from God. The Christian life takes them in hand and turns them in an entirely different direction; they acquire an entirely different content. Even though in external form there is much that resembles past practices, in reality everything has become new, the old has in essence passed away and the new has come.”<sup>27</sup>

Indeed, this is what is at the heart of subversive fulfilment. We recognise that nothing is really neutral; all of our thoughts, words, actions and choices outside of Christ are idolatrous. For example, my choice of what to wear in the morning is not neutral because my motives are to honour someone else (my football team when I wear their shirt or the pop star whose picture is emblazoned on my top) or myself as I seek to show off my physical body. The Gospel orientates my thinking to what glorifies Christ and what is helpful to others. Paul tells us that we should do everything to God’s glory (1 Corinthians 10: 31) and this love for God and for my neighbour will be seen even in what I eat and who I eat with.

Possessio means that

“Christ takes the life of a people in his hands, he renews and re-establishes the distorted and deteriorated; he fills each thing, each word, and each practice with a new meaning and gives it a new direction.”<sup>28</sup>

### Preaching

The role of the missionary is first and foremost to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Bavinck held to a high view of this proclamation, or preaching in its widest sense as demonstrated by two tremendous quotes. As we saw earlier, Bavinck saw preaching as the offer of God himself so that sinners meet Christ in our preaching.<sup>29</sup>

This means that the person who shares the Gospel has a high responsibility, privilege and duty. We are representing God himself and our aim is to see people encounter God through the Gospel. This means that whether it is in a sermon to a crowd, Bible study with a small group or in 1-1 conversation, something special is happening when the good news is announced. It can never be a mere intellectual exercise. God himself through the Holy Spirit is present, active and at work.

Bavinck suggests that the preacher has four important questions to consider before they begin to speak:

1. Who are we preaching to?<sup>30</sup>
2. Who is the person preaching and what is their relationship to the audience? “A father speaks differently to a child than a child speaks to his friend.”<sup>31</sup>
3. When the encounter takes place: “One speaks differently to a person when he is sick in bed than when he is in the middle of his work.”<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 179.

<sup>28</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 179.

<sup>29</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 81-82.

<sup>30</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 82.

<sup>31</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 83.

<sup>32</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 85.

4. The place where the gospel encounter happens – home, neutral or hostile territory for the recipient.<sup>33</sup>

Once again, we are being encouraged to contextualise. The Gospel is not communicated in abstract but as Bavinck has made clear, in the concrete reality of encounters with human beings who have their own culture, history and experience.

This means that the work of communicating the Gospel doesn't start with a prepared sermon. The missionary, "as soon as he sets foot in the place where he is going to work, he must face the question as to how he should approach the people. How must he win their confidence? How can he understand their inner life?"<sup>34</sup>

This creates challenges. The cross-cultural missionary is stepping into a new and potentially bewildering life. Bavinck describes it here in terms of moving from a Western to Asian context.

"The missionary is himself accustomed to a completely different mode of life. He dresses differently, desires a better house, and sleeps under a mosquito net. He will possibly eat different food and follow certain types of hygiene to escape many illnesses. And if he is married it will soon appear that he sustains a completely different relation to his wife from that of those around him. Moreover, he speaks a different language and disregards all sorts of religious rules considered necessary by the populace. In case of illness he does not call for the witch doctor, he does not work with charms and the like, but he uses medicine which he has brought with him, and which he carefully guards. In short, those to whom he would speak very quickly understand that this missionary lives in a manner which is in every respect different from theirs. He is different from them in everything. Everything that they regard as holy and necessary, he disregards. With amazement they notice that he tramples the old tribal morality under foot. In their eyes this missionary is a terribly dangerous person, a person who disregards the most holy precepts, a thoroughly ill bred man, and above all a thoroughly stupid man."<sup>35</sup>

He goes on:

"The missionary has to learn everything. He has to learn how to speak the language, and in this respect he is more stupid than the smallest child. He must in this strange world also learn what fruits are edible and what are not. He appears as the very picture or epitome of a grown up child, as one who literally knows nothing, yet is so conceited that he does not live according to the rules prescribed by their divine forefathers."<sup>36</sup>

Now, the move from the South East of England to a council estate in a Northern city or a suburb to the inner city may not seem as extreme. You are not going to have to worry about medical risks or mosquitos, you may not be learning a new language, and yet you are learning a new culture. There may be a change in dress code: what you wear may indicate not just whether you belong but where you belong if it indicates gang identity, hierarchy etc. There may be different ways of doing things. To give a small example, we live on a cul-de-sac and there's a kind of known hierarchy as well as little rules about who parks where. That may sound trivial but get it wrong and you've potentially caused significant offence. There are sometimes different expectations. Traditionally West Yorkshire was a place where people would be in and out of each other's houses; in the South East you would not

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<sup>33</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 86.

<sup>34</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 88.

<sup>35</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 88.

<sup>36</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 88.

acknowledge your neighbour in the street; in parts of the Black Country, whilst everyone knows one another well and they talk in the street, you don't tend to just invite people in immediately. Starting off with an invite round for a dinner party might go down like a lead balloon, though a barbecue in the garden might be a good ice breaker. Language may be a bit more subtle, people may speak English (though in multi-ethnic inner city areas this is by no means guaranteed) but local dialectal variations can lead to confusion. In parts of Yorkshire you may be asked to "make us a mash" and you head off to cook some potatoes. You've got it wrong: they were expecting a cup of tea!

So, we may find ourselves in a new culture and at this stage we don't really know people yet. The contacts we have got haven't yet naturally led to gospel conversations. However, there is a sense in which we are already preaching. Bavinck says,

"The manner in which he lives during this entire period is of extreme importance. It is during this period that it is decided whether or not he will be able to break through the wall of misunderstanding and fear and win the confidence of the tribe, or whether he will be regarded as an extremely unwelcome intruder."<sup>37</sup>

How long does that time period last? Well, it may vary from weeks through months to years. When I first arrived in Smethwick, I struck up a friendship with the local Baptist pastor. He told me that he had been in the area about 5 years and it was now that he was beginning to be accepted as someone who was committed to and part of the community. From my own experience, I think he is right. Urban ministry means that we have to be here for the long-haul.

We are beginning to see that whilst Bavinck saw mission as gospel proclamation, he still saw it in broader terms than preaching as we know it in the narrow sense of sermons and speaking. Bavinck points us to Jesus who used both words and deeds (c.f. John 5:36 where it says he comes to do the Father's work).<sup>38</sup> This means that he takes a non-cessationist position, expecting that signs and wonders should take place.<sup>39</sup> However, as well as miracles, he also points us to Jesus' day to day life, building relationships and showing love:

"Think of Jesus' relationship to tax collectors, Samaritans, to an adulterous woman, and to sinners who came to him in full repentance. Innumerable little things characterize the preaching of Jesus and give it a particular form within the hard reality of everyday life."<sup>40</sup>

These little things include

"By his entry into the house of Matthew, by his questioning of the Samaritan women, by the things he did on the Sabbath, indeed by a thousand small and apparently insignificant actions, he broke down the present social and religious order and laid the foundations of a new society in which all would be different."<sup>41</sup>

So, for Bavinck, this word and deed type of preaching includes ways of showing identification with the people you are coming to live amongst. He notes that mission has lots of examples of those who contextualised by dress, food, etc.<sup>42</sup> In urban Britain, we might add learning to love the local football

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<sup>37</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 89.

<sup>38</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 90.

<sup>39</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 92.

<sup>40</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 92.

<sup>41</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 92-93.

<sup>42</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 94.

team. His encouragement of this type of contextualisation to our proclamation, though, is accompanied by a warning:

“Experience has shown us, however, that such identification is not always without danger. The possibility exists that the missionary who casts off his own culture and identifies himself with his hearers will gradually sink spiritually and morally in his new environment and thereby lose the power to fulfil his calling. It is also possible that the people whose customs are being so carefully imitated may view this as a form of deceit and react against it.”<sup>43</sup>

Bavinck’s primary point is that the missionary is no longer their own person:

“the missionary must to a certain degree give up his freedom to be himself and must be bound by his new service, in order to save as many as possible.”<sup>44</sup>

We are reminded at this point of the apostle Paul’s statement that he was willing to be all things to all men, a Jew to the Jew and a Greek to the Greeks so that somehow he might save some.

So much for the broader context to our proclamation: what about the proclamation itself? Bavinck sometimes refers to this as “The Kerygmatic approach.” The whole point of our preaching is that it is bringing good news to sinners.

“Our first consideration, however, is that we understand what man is. In its deepest essence biblical anthropology recognizes that man is a sinner, a rebel, an exile, a displaced person. Within his deepest nature, man is ever concerned with God. God makes him anxious, man seeks to escape God by shoving him aside beyond the horizon of his experience. Man feels assaulted, hunted and oppressed by God, and he rebels. Such is the awful mystery in the life of every man, the drama enacted in his hidden most parts. It is an integral part of his fallen nature, a part of his being a son of Adam. This is what man is, this is his existential basis, the ground on which he stands.”<sup>45</sup>

The challenge of preaching Christ and seeing people convicted of sin is that although people have rejected God and turned their backs on him, they have created religious systems that convince them that they do in fact love and know God. We are preaching to religious people.

“Man lives religiously, he has certain conceptions of God, or of gods, of spirits, of magic and the supernatural, of life after death, and of moral norms. It may be that this religious life is negatively directed, that it discloses itself in objections to religion characterised by convictions against the tenability of religious life. But in any case, consciously or unconsciously, each person has numerous presuppositions about God, the value of a man, and many other things, and he shares these notions with many other people.”<sup>46</sup>

In urban Britain, this will include a range of religious beliefs, including some forms of folk superstition, an inherited cultural/traditional Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism. It will also include a variety of secular, agnostic and atheistic positions that in fact take on a religious dimension. These beliefs provide the outer layer for people’s lives and when we begin to talk about God, Christ and the Gospel create a filter through which our message is heard or rather, obscured.

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<sup>43</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 95.

<sup>44</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 95

<sup>45</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 122.

<sup>46</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 123.

“Man thus erects diverse defences and certainties around the heart of his integral existence as a man and a sinner. Now this peripheral life, this living in a bulwark of defences is clearly determined in its deepest motives by what takes place within its inner depths. For ‘it is out of the heart that everything proceeds,’ says Jesus (cf. Matthew 15:19).<sup>47</sup>

Religion creates a dichotomy between the external appearance and inner reality.

“Within the depths of his being a person may be in flight from God, whilst outwardly he seeks to praise God in his religious life. The God that he thus seeks has then become an unrecognizable frustrating God, a God completely drawn into the earthly sphere, who is factually identical with nature.”<sup>48</sup>

Ironically, we try to find peace by avoiding God and religion can be the way to do this.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the outer, protective layer of religiosity. Bavinck retains great confidence in the power of the Gospel and the ability of the Holy Spirit to cut through those layers, through the preaching of God’s Word.

“No further argument is needed to show that the gospel approach would reach man in his very depths, where all protective cloaks have been removed, and where he knows himself to be face to face with his God. Such is also the meaning of Jesus when he refers to the great work the Holy Spirit will do in the world, ‘and when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgement’ (John 16:8).”<sup>50</sup>

However, the reality of those outer layers throws up another challenge for us. Is it better to dive straight in with a direct attack on sin and call to salvation to progress more gradually with an indirect approach that begins to engage with the outer layers and to dismantle arguments, conceptions and deeply held beliefs through apologetics and teaching.<sup>51</sup> Bavinck sees both methods as having both something to offer and disadvantages. It is important to look at each context in turn and seek guidance for the right way ahead.<sup>52</sup> Scripture shows both methods being employed. When Nathan rebukes David, he goes in direct, as when Paul calls out to the Philippian jailer. However, “on the Areopagus, he (Paul) took the cultural situation of his audience very seriously and dealt with their presuppositions.”<sup>53</sup>

If proclamation is a one to one encounter, then,

“In the first place we must try to see the person with whom we are dealing. This means that we must seek to see through a person’s name, position, reasons and arguments, and try to reach his real-life problems.”<sup>54</sup>

It is vital that our encounters are characterised by love.<sup>55</sup> This is both because we love the person and see their need but also because we humbly recognise our own sin and dependency on grace.

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<sup>47</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 123.

<sup>48</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 123.

<sup>49</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 123.

<sup>50</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 124.

<sup>51</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 124-125.

<sup>52</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 125.

<sup>53</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 125.

<sup>54</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 125.

<sup>55</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 126.

“Meeting-in-love includes the recognition of myself in the other person, a sympathetic feeling of his guilt and sincere desire in Christ to do with this man what Christ has done with me.”<sup>56</sup>

Gospel proclamation will lead to a confrontation between the preacher and hearer’s beliefs. This confrontation includes a searching out for ‘points of contact’ so that we begin where they are.

“A point of contact is sought in the life and thought of the people. An effort is made to begin where they are, with their own views of salvation and the divine. In the course of the discussion, efforts are then made to penetrate to the heart of their religious beliefs and practices in contrast to the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>57</sup>

This means that,

“One begins with that is already known and clearly understood by the audience.”<sup>58</sup> This means “the message of Christ is not set in a vacuum.”<sup>59</sup>

If we take an indirect, apologetic approach, then we will engage with the things that the hearer believes.

“The old belief is examined, its depth is measured and its basic motives laid bare. And after a certain point, the mighty word of Christ is spoken; God’s judgement is then pronounced and the finely spun webs of human thought are brushed aside. The gap between the word of God and the speculation of man becomes visible. But God’s call to repentance can now acquire a concrete and precisely understood meaning.”<sup>60</sup>

Bavinck observes that this forces us to stop, ask questions and learn from those we are engaging with. We get them to tell us what they believe and why. He sees a secondary benefit to this in cross-cultural mission because seeking to understand and engage with their beliefs helps in contexts where westerners are often seen as proud and arrogant.<sup>61</sup> We might add that this applies in our context too where middle class, white believers may also be seen as proud and arrogant.

### Elenctics

The term ‘elenctics’ comes from the Greek word *elenchos* which was originally to do with exposing someone’s shame. In the New Testament, it is all to do with the work (particularly of the Holy Spirit) of convicting of sin and guilt (See especially John 16:8).<sup>62</sup>

Bavinck uses the word to mean “the conviction and unmasking of sin, and... the call to responsibility.”<sup>63</sup> He explains that,

“When we speak of elenctics we do well to understand it in the sense that it has in John 16:8. The Holy Spirit is actually the only conceivable subject of this verb, for the conviction of

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<sup>56</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 127.

<sup>57</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 131.

<sup>58</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 132.

<sup>59</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 133.

<sup>60</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 133.

<sup>61</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 133.

<sup>62</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 221.

<sup>63</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 226.

sin exceeds all human ability. Only the Holy Spirit can do this although he can and will use us as instruments in his hand.”<sup>64</sup>

This means that whilst we are talking about the Holy Spirit’s work, it is through his indwelling of believers and equipping them with gospel proclamation gifts that he does his work. This means that, for Bavinck, the skill of bringing people to that point where they are convicted of their sin and idolatry is a vital part of the science of missions.

For him, it is not primarily about using reason and philosophical arguments to win the point, although reason is frequently used in the apologetic arguments found in Scripture. For example, consider the sarcasm of Isaiah 44: false religion calls people to make idols from trees with half the tree being used to carve the image and the other half turned into firewood. Isaiah uses reason to show the folly of false religion.

“Paganism is indeed foolishness, and it can be profitable to point this out. But the spear point of the prophetic elenctic argument is thrust in another direction: idolatry is despicable, a terrible rebellion against the only true God; it is satanic pride, self-idolatry, self-deification an attempt to pull God down to the world, and to make God a servant of one’s self.”<sup>65</sup>

Reason as in the use of logic is here distinguished from rationalism, the trust in reason alone.<sup>66</sup> *Note that Bavinck is not merely saying that rationalism/philosophy isn’t a tool available to us but that it isn’t an effective tool. In fact it will do more harm than good because it will fail to tell the hearer things he needs to know, for example “...we will have to tell him directly of Satan”<sup>67</sup> and because if the aim is an encounter with the living, loving, covenant God, then philosophy lands us in the wrong place. It leads to “an abstract concept of God” which creates a vacuum<sup>68</sup> “The God which he now knows is an idea, it is not a living God, not a redeemer.”<sup>69</sup>*

But if reason is not our primary tool for doing elenctics, then how are we to see people who don’t know Christ convicted of sin?<sup>70</sup> Bavinck answers,

“It must first be noted that each person, no matter how deeply fallen and how far departed, still is within the reach of God’s common grace.”<sup>71</sup>

Once again, we return to the conflict at the heart of every person, that we are both aware of God even as we run away from him (c.f. Romans 1:19). Bavinck explains that,

“There is deep in the heart of man, even among those who live and believe in non-Christian religions, a very vague awareness that man plays a game with God and that man is secretly busy escaping from him. I cannot explain this phenomenon in any other way except that God’s revelation reaches every man.”<sup>72</sup>

However, we need to be careful in our thinking. Some theologians and missiologists have taken this point to suggest that all religions in some way contain aspects of God’s revealed truth. Bavinck says

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<sup>64</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 222.

<sup>65</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 226.

<sup>66</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 226.

<sup>67</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 230-231.

<sup>68</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 230.

<sup>69</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 230.

<sup>70</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 227.

<sup>71</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 227.

<sup>72</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 228.

that, “we must be very cautious if we would speak about moments of truth in non-Christian religions.”<sup>73</sup> He goes on to explain,

“That they believe in a God is an element of truth, but what they say and think of him is entirely different from what God has revealed of himself in his word. The words found in the sacred books of other religions which are nearly identical with the words of the Bible ought also not to lead us into error. Within their entire context, they certainly have a different meaning.”<sup>74</sup>

Whilst there is a strong argument for what some have termed “*priscae theologia*” or “original revelation”, the idea that Adam and Noah passed something of their knowledge of God down to their descendants, if they inherited some special revelation then it has been so fragmented and distorted by sin as to not be able to offer us useful revelation of God and his ways. Words and concepts familiar to Christians may appear in other religions but,

“Concepts such a sin, grace, redemption, prayer, sacrifice, which we encounter in other religions, all have a different content than in the Bible.”<sup>75</sup>

What that shared language gives is shared questions about God, Creation, Humanity and New Creation. In other words, we start to find points of contact. Additional points of contact are found as we see something of ourselves in the unbeliever and recognise our own sin.

“The more you learn to know heathendom in its deepest motives (which lie hidden beneath its foolish and childish reasonings), the more you recognize yourself therein; you see that you yourself are repeatedly busy, in the same way, trying to flee from God and to push him aside, although you do so in a much more refined and sophisticated manner.”<sup>76</sup>

This also means that personal testimony of God’s grace at work in your own life has a powerful part to play in elenctics.

“Your own life, in which God’s grace has performed and patiently continues to perform a wonderful work against the unruliness of your own heart, itself constitutes a basis for your elenctic efforts.”<sup>77</sup>

So, we go into the fray, a little like David, the shepherd boy not heavily armoured with intellectual tools but stripped and with only a slingshot in our hands.

“You do not then need to begin with endless rational argumentation in order to break the webs of his thoughts. In the grace of Jesus Christ you possess a more powerful means. Paul writes, ‘And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstrations of the Spirit and of power.’ (1 Corinthians 2:4).”<sup>78</sup>

It is the preacher and preaching that will be used by the Holy Spirit to convict.

Contextualisation is in fact a thread that runs through all of the concepts: our lives, preaching and gospel confrontation can never happen in abstract.

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<sup>73</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 228.

<sup>74</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 228.

<sup>75</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 228.

<sup>76</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 230.

<sup>77</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 230

<sup>78</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 230.

“Elenctics ... can actually be exercised only in living contact with the adherents of other religions. Each generalization, every systematization, carries within itself the danger that one will do injustice to the living person. In practice I am never concerned with Buddhism, but with a living person and his Buddhism, I am never in contact with Islam but with a Moslem and his Mohammedanism.”<sup>79</sup>

This means that whilst the type of exercise we are undertaking here has its place, there’s a time for reading, thinking and writing, you cannot beat getting to know actual people:

“If I seek to take a man by storm with general rules and norms derived from books, it is possible that I may miss the mark, and what I say may go over his head, because what he himself finds in his own religion, and the way in which he lives it, is something entirely different from what I had originally thought.”<sup>80</sup>

We cannot simply assume that a Muslim adheres to a systematic form of his religion as outlined in some textbook on Islam. We may find that he has inconsistent beliefs, maybe even some idiosyncratic ideas of his own too and there may be a gap between his head knowledge of his religion and his practice of it. This is of course the same with Christianity. Likewise, we will discover that there is a massive difference between reading a book about the working classes with all its generalisations and talking to real working class people.

Once again, this pushes us towards humility as we must start as learners not teachers, observing, asking questions, getting to know people.

“Elenctics must first of all begin with the precise and calm knowledge of the nature of the religion with which it is concerned. It must do this honestly and calmly; that is to say, it must not be too quick to interrupt, it must let this religion state its case. What does it actually think about God? How does it think of the relation between God and the World? What does it say of man, of his misery and of his salvation? How are all such matters confessed theoretically but, not only that, how are they lived practically? What does this religion mean to its followers; how does it conduct their life, how does it give direction, protection, safety, hope?”<sup>81</sup>

### Subversive Fulfilment

You won’t find this actual phrase in Bavinck, in fact we owe it to another Dutch Reformed Missiologist, Hendrik Kraemer. However, the phrase effectively sums up Bavinck’s methodology.

Subversive Fulfilment is based on the premise that each person has questions, dreams, aspirations, longings, needs etc. The religious dimension to our lives which Bavinck describes means that we are aware that there is more to life than this. Those distorted fragments of truth we have inherited from Adam bury down into our lives, scratching away and provoking discontent. The Fulfilment part of the phrase means that only Christ can fulfil our deepest needs and longings. However, it is not simply that Christ fulfils the longings: truth has been fragmented and distorted and even our deep desires are idolatrous. This is where the “subverted” part of the phrase comes in. It means that our longings which are orientated towards ourselves and our idols as expressions of pride and selfishness have to be turned around and orientated to the Christ through the Gospel. It means that those broken,

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<sup>79</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 240.

<sup>80</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 240 – 241.

<sup>81</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 241-242.

distorted fragments of truth have to be repaired and re-ordered so that they fit together, find their place and make sense in God’s true revelation.

We are going to be learning how to do this in an urban context. To help us do so, we also have a process to work through.

### 2.3. The 4 Steps

Dan Strange of Oak Hill Theological College has suggested a four-step process for engaging with people in their cultural context for the Gospel. In “Unreached,” Tim Chester lists them as “Enter, explore, engage, evangelise.”<sup>82</sup>

However, I prefer the four headings Dan first used when he introduced this methodology to his students: Step In, Search Out, Show Up and Show Off.

Step In is a call to leave our own world, our own culture, behind, to step out of our comfort zones and into a new world. Evangelism cannot be done at a distance. If we are ambassadors for Christ, then we are not called to engage in megaphone diplomacy. Rather, we are to get close and get to know people, making our lives among them.

Search Out means that we will get to know the culture in which we live. As we have seen from Bavinck, this will mean taking time to observe and ask questions. We will discover their beliefs, felt needs, longings and their questions. We will be looking for those points of contact.

Show Up is where we start to confront the idolatry which is at the root of their beliefs and practices. This is where we begin to subvert the worldview in which we find ourselves. We will show how their presuppositions are faulty and so can never offer fulfilment and never answer their deepest questions, needs and longings.

Show Off means that we point them to the Gospel of Jesus Christ in all its glory and show how he is the fulfilment that they were always longing and hoping for.

We will be using these four steps to help us navigate urban mission in our study. I would also suggest that these steps relate to and overlap with Bavinck’s terminology as follows.

Process	Bavinck Terminology
Step In	Contextualisation
Search Out	
Show Up	Elenctics
Show Off	Preaching

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<sup>82</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 100.

### 3 An introduction to idolatry

An important part of the Subversive Fulfilment approach is an understanding of idolatry. The subversive part of the term comes from the fact that even our dreams and desires are idolatrous. We cannot simply offer the possibility to people that their life will find fulfilment in Christ: we must start by showing them that in their dreams and desires, their lives are orientated the wrong way, away from the true and living God and towards false gods. Mission must involve a call to repentance, a call to turn from false gods and idolatrous worship to wholehearted worship and devotion to the true and living God.

#### 3.1. Idolatry is a heart issue

In Deuteronomy 6, we are introduced to the first and greatest commandment on which the whole of the Law hangs:

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”<sup>83</sup>

This means we are to love him with our whole being, with all that we are. This is an exclusive form of love. What does this love look like? Well, the first two of the Ten Commandments flesh this out by telling us,

“You shall have no other gods before<sup>l</sup> me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments.”<sup>84</sup>

It is helpful then to understand the fall of Genesis 3 in terms of idolatry. In Genesis 1-2, we discover that God makes a good world; he makes humans to live in the world and to look after the world for him. He provides for them: food, help, the work itself and boundaries/rules enabling them to know how to live in his world under his rule and blessing. The provision of rules and boundaries is exemplified in the command to not eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

#### 3.2. Idolatry starts with a distorted caricature of the true God

In Genesis 3, Adam and Eve are tempted by the serpent. The nature of the temptation is an attack on God’s goodness and greatness. His goodness is attacked as the truthfulness and motives for his commands are undermined. Blocher comments,

“The snake’s attack on the truth of God’s word is launched in an indirect manner, by imputing hidden motives that God’s revelation passes over in silence, by subjecting the terms of the covenant to ‘the hermeneutic of suspicion’. Even when he is so bold as to contradict the terms of God’s words, ‘DYING you shall not die’ (v4), there is still ambiguity. The unusual placing of the negative leaves open the possibility of understanding it as: ‘It is not proper death that you shall undergo’; in other words, dare to experience the trivial death-like change that will bring you the experience of full humanity.”<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4-5.

<sup>84</sup> Deuteronomy 5:8-10 (ESV).

<sup>85</sup> Blocher, *In the Beginning*, 139.

Similarly, God's sovereignty is undermined as his ability to communicate clearly is questioned when he says, "Did God really say...?" and as it is implied that he has something to fear from human rivalry. The idea that we humans could seriously rival him for his power and his glory is treated as reasonable instead of ridiculous.

Therefore, sin starts when we start to believe lies about God. This reflects the third commandment's instruction not to take God's name in vain.<sup>86</sup> It is worth spelling out exactly the nature of the god imagined in the conversation between Eve and the Serpent in Genesis 3:1-7.

- This is a god who cannot communicate clearly to us. We cannot be sure about his revelation.
- This is a god whose word cannot be relied upon – he does not speak truthfully; what he says will not come true.
- This is a god whose motives cannot be trusted – he is not acting for our good but to restrict us.
- This is a god whose sovereignty cannot be depended upon. God is presented as acting out of fear.

Now, it is irrational for Adam and Eve to believe these things about the living God. It is not as though they have only known about God at a distance; they have personally encountered him as he has walked and talked with them in the garden. Yet, sin's idolatry starts with our decision to believe lies about God.

Romans 1:16-32 shows how humanity chooses to suppress the truth about God (v18) and exchange it for a lie (v25.) The truth is that God has clearly revealed who he is to us. We have actively chosen to disbelieve the truth and instead believe lies about him. Dan Strange, commenting on Romans 1, notes first of all that revelation is unavoidably clear. It is not something we had to tease out and discover for ourselves, it "does not simply slide off man ineffectually like a raindrop glides off a waxy tree leaf."<sup>87</sup> Secondly, he observes that idolatry is a hostile and violent act as we wilfully suppress the truth about God.<sup>88</sup> Strange likens the language of suppression in Romans 1:18 to

"a child playing with an inflatable ball in the water. She tried to hold the ball under the water with all her might and thinks she has succeeded, but the ball always pops up to the surface again for the child to try again and so on."<sup>89</sup>

This is important because the god we reject is in fact a false god and not the true and living God. We have already created an idol by accepting a distorted caricature of YHWH.

Sin and idolatry are therefore, first and foremost, an offense to God's honour. Calvin puts it like this:

"At the same time, it is to be observed, that the first man revolted against the authority of God, not only in allowing himself to be ensnared by the wiles of the devil, but also by despising the truth and turning aside to lies. Assuredly when the word of God is despised, all reverence for him is gone."<sup>90</sup>

This gives us some sense of what it means to take God's name in vain. It is not simply using "God" and "Jesus" as swear words. God's name represents his character including his power, love and

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<sup>86</sup> Deuteronomy 5:11.

<sup>87</sup> Strange, "Perilous Exchange," 113.

<sup>88</sup> Strange, "Perilous Exchange," 113.

<sup>89</sup> Strange, "Perilous Exchange," 113.

<sup>90</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.4. (Beveridge 1:213).

covenant faithfulness. When we deny these things, we empty God's name of its meaning. God is replaced with a powerless idol.

This also means that people can on one level be religiously orthodox in that the claim to worship the one true God. They don't worship physical idols, they belong to churches, they sing Christian hymns and offer "Christian prayers" that conform to orthodox liturgy. However, if the image of God they have in their heart is the one described above, then they are worshipping an idol.

This is relevant to our urban subversive fulfilment task for three reasons. First of all, because I am going to keep insisting that the work must start with our own hearts. Jesus tells us to remove the logs from our own eyes before tackling the splinters in others. Subversive Fulfilment is not just a missiological or apologetic device but also a means to self-evangelism. We start by searching out our own hearts and preaching the Gospel to ourselves. Still more accurately, it means allowing God's Holy Spirit through Scripture to search out our own hearts and to disagree with us. Do I have a faulty understanding of God? Is my own heart idolatrous?

Secondly, because a lot of Gospel work in urban communities is not about starting from scratch. Churches already exist on estates and in inner city communities. As well as church planting, there are great opportunities for mission through church revitalisation. Some of us will end up pastoring existing churches that have become introverted and fossilized. Revitalisation must start with a challenge: "has the church become idolatrous even whilst appearing orthodox? Has it lost sight of God's greatness and goodness, his sovereign power, his faithful love and his amazing outpoured grace?"

Thirdly, we will be meeting people who have some form of Christian heritage. This will include white working class people who attended a church school, whose grandparents went to church and whose parents were sent to Sunday School. There will be a legacy here and we may well find some points of contact as they remember prayers, Bible verses and hymns. But the picture they have of the God they heard about may be false. It will also include immigrants from cultures where there is at least some form of Christian heritage including South American cultures with Catholicism and Pentecostalism and African cultures also with a mix of Christian heritages. Again, we will meet people who at least on some level seek to know and worship the God of the Bible but may have a distorted understanding of who he is.

### **3.3. Idolatry means that we worship the Creature instead of the Creator**

Romans 1:22 goes on to tell us that we have exchanged God's glory for the worship of creatures. Of course, once our image of the true God is a distorted, idolatrous caricature, then it is much easier to give up this god for idols than it is to give up the real thing.

In Genesis 2-3, the irony is that humans, who were made to look after creation and enjoy its benefits, make idols out of the serpent who they choose to listen to instead of God and the tree which they look to in order to meet their felt needs and desires instead of trusting God to provide them with what they need.

### **3.4. Idolatry sees us attempt to pursue idolatrous desires through false means**

This takes us to the third point about idolatry. Our desires become idolatrous. In Romans 1, this is exemplified by the handing over of humanity to unnatural sexual desire. In Genesis 3, it is seen in the way that knowledge is prioritised over everything else God provides and everything it means to be made in God's image. The promise the serpent makes is that Adam and Eve will be god-like. The irony is that they are already made in God's image, but they want a perverted form of that *Imago*

*Dei*. They don't just want to be image bearers: they want shared status, or even to usurp God's position. This, of course, offers a sharp contrast with Christ, who was in very nature God but did not see equality with God as something to be held onto.<sup>91</sup> Calvin registers this as ingratitude:<sup>92</sup>

"It was surely monstrous impiety that a son of earth should deem it little to have been made in the likeness, unless he were also made equal to God."<sup>93</sup>

Idoltrous desires are costly. In their pursuit of knowledge, Adam and Eve lose something which comes with the *Imago Dei* – they lose life. God has warned them that they if they ate the fruit then they would die. Death is seen in their exile from God's presence, the reality of coming physical death and eternity in hell. Not only that, but they lose the very thing they are seeking after. They become fools and their minds are darkened.<sup>94</sup>

The final thing to say about sin and idolatry is that the goal is to make ourselves into God. Idol worship is self-worship. It is a pride thing. Adam and Eve are tempted by the possibility of becoming like God. The problem is that we think that we can use creation for our own ends; we believe that our idols serve us when in fact we are enslaved to them. Romans 1:21 says that humans thought they were becoming wise when in fact they were becoming fools. Adam and Eve believe they are escaping tyranny and discovering freedom, but have, in fact, become enslaved to creation. This is shown biblically in the judgement pronounced in Genesis 3:16-20. Childbirth will come with pain and harvest will require sweat and toil in the face of thorns and thistles. In Romans 1:24-32, we are told that humanity has been handed over to "impurity", "dishonourable passions" and "debased minds."

Later on, we will look at examples of idolatry and idoltrous desires within the communities we are seeking to reach, but once again we want to start by looking at ourselves and how even as we are called to mission in urban communities, we risk being distracted by the idolatry of our own dreams, passions and priorities. These can include the desire

- For success as we seek to build a reputation and a name for ourselves.
- To find meaning and identity as the saviours of people we are coming to serve.
- To impose our own order and control onto other people, places and events. This, for example, may result in the cloning of ministry methods and structures.

### **3.5. Idolatry seeks to enjoy the goodness of God's provision in isolation from God**

The final thing to say about idolatry is that because we believe lies about God, we seek to place God at a distance and enjoy his provision without him. One of the startling things about Genesis 3:1-7 is that, for the first time in the narrative, we have extended text where God does not speak or act. Now, the reality is that God is always speaking, always active and always near; he hasn't in fact abandoned Adam and Eve. Yet they and the serpent act as though God is absent.

Religion has a habit of putting God at a distance so that he becomes the "unknown god" of Acts 17:23. We learn to believe the lies that

- God is remote, unapproachable and uninterested in us.
- That God holds on to all the good things that we need and deserve.

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<sup>91</sup> Philippians 2:6.

<sup>92</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.4. (Beveridge 1:213).

<sup>93</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, II.i.4. (Beveridge 1:213).

<sup>94</sup> Romans 1:21.

- That our priority and purpose is to somehow reach up to God so that we can claim those good things for ourselves to enjoy them.

This, in effect, becomes a snatch and grab mission. We devise means in order to try and reach up to God, take what we are owed and then return to our own lives so we can enjoy them. This is, in fact, the root presupposition of Gnosticism. Gnosticism teaches that God is an unknowable spirit, that matter is an unpleasant accident and that God cannot come into contact with it. We somehow need to escape from matter to enjoy spirit life.

This thinking is seen in Roman Catholicism where somehow through penance and prayers to saints we hope to enjoy grace and it is seen especially in the prosperity gospel where we hope by using the right words, and knowing the right preachers, to have access to the health and wealth that is ours by right. Prosperity teaching suggests that if we use the right words and exercise enough faith then somehow this unlocks God's treasure stores so that he is forced to comply with our demands.

We must be wary because even our preaching of the Gospel can give the impression that we offer something similar. If people say the right prayer and come to the right churches, then God will be compelled to forgive them and give them the free gift of eternal life which they can then enjoy without an ongoing obedient relationship to him.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

In Acts 17, we see Paul taking time to explore the city of Athens. He is distraught at the idolatry of the city. Mission means stepping into a world of idols. Our response as we step in and search out should be distress too.

However, mission also means that we have to step into our own idolatrous world too and search out the false beliefs that distort our understanding of God and distract us from his mission.

# **Part 2**

## **Searching Out**

## 4 Getting to know the context and culture

I love the start of a holiday. One of the first things we've done after we've found where we're staying, had a cuppa and unpacked is go out for a walk and start to explore the area on foot. It doesn't matter if it's New York, Paris or Cornwall. Walking around, you get a feel for the area, you get to see where some of the sites of interest are and you also find out useful things like where the shops are. Getting a feel for the place is useful whether you are planning to be somewhere for a fortnight or twenty years.

As we saw earlier, the "searching out" step is all about putting contextualisation into practice. If we are going to reach urban communities with the Gospel, then we need to understand and engage with the culture. Contextualisation is about doing that: observing and understanding people and communities so that the Word of God is applied to their specific situation. As Bavinck explains, the missionary

"as soon as he sets foot in the place where he is going to work, he must face the question as to how he should approach the people. How must he win their confidence? How can he understand their inner life?"<sup>95</sup>

Searching out is therefore all about recognising the genuine and legitimate hopes, dreams and values of people without acquiescing to sinful and idolatrous aspects of culture. Therefore, this stage in the process also aligns with the concept of *posessio* because, as we saw earlier, it is not about accommodating false beliefs.<sup>96</sup>

### 4.1. A Biblical Theology of Searching Out

I think there's something of this in Genesis 12:4-9. Abram has been told to go to the Land God has given him and promised that he will be blessed. Obediently, he heads towards Canaan, but he doesn't immediately settle in one place; travelling north to South, he passed through the land, stopping at different points, pitching his tent and building altars. He is doing two things. First of all, he is getting a feel for the terrain, and secondly, he is symbolically expressing his trust in God's promise. There is a prophetic dimension to his actions.<sup>97</sup>

Before the Israelites are about to go into the Land after the Exodus, Moses, and later Joshua, send out spies to search out the land.<sup>98</sup> The purpose of their expedition is to bring back a report on the state of affairs. Are the people numerous or few? Are they weak or strong? Are they living in fortified strongholds? Is the land good? They are told not just to report but to bring back evidence, a sample of fruit from the land.<sup>99</sup> What they see produces different responses. Two spies are encouraged by what they see: they call on the people to go and take the land because God has given it to them. The other 10, however, focus on the strength of the inhabitants and the people are discouraged.<sup>100</sup>

It is worth noting as we read that account that it was God who had instructed Moses to send in the spies: observing and reporting was not rebellion against him. At the same time, they were not

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<sup>95</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 88.

<sup>96</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 178.

<sup>97</sup> Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1. Word, 1987), 283.

<sup>98</sup> See Numbers 13 and Joshua 2.

<sup>99</sup> Numbers 13:17-20.

<sup>100</sup> Numbers 13:25-33.

reporting back on anything God didn't know. He knew the lie of the land before they arrived. Yet, God's purpose was for them to see the goodness of the land and to be encouraged to go up and possess it. At the same time, they were meant to see the strength of the people too, not so that they would be disheartened, but so that they would know that they must depend upon God for victory. The difference between the ten spies and the two spies was not that one group overestimated the strength of the enemy or played down the prosperity of the land and the other group over played the goodness of Canaan and were naïve about the strength of the enemy. Rather, the 2 displayed a greater faith in God's strength to overcome powerful enemies and fulfil his promises.

In Acts 17, Paul arrives in Athens. What does he do when he gets there? The answer once again is that he starts to explore. He visits the sights. However, he is not taken in by the beauty of the city like some wide-eyed tourist. Instead, he sees the idolatry of the city. It is a city that is submerged in idols.<sup>101</sup>

Notice that when Paul starts to preach in Athens and to speak at Mars Hill that everything he says is informed by what he has seen. Peterson observes,

“The external impulse for Paul's speech was the specific context in Athens and the challenge of Greek thought and practice more generally. Luke makes it clear that Paul's response to idolatry and the ignorance of pagan worship was to proclaim Jesus and the resurrection in the marketplace to anyone who happened to be there (17:16-18).”<sup>102</sup>

Secondly, we can see that Paul's observations enable him to speak specifically to the hearts of his audience. His observations tell him that the people of Athens are both at the same time unique in terms of their specific culture, philosophy and idolatry, as well as similar to all people everywhere in their ignorance of and opposition to the one true God.

“In responding to this request, Paul had to deal with an audience that was more educated and cultured than the one addressed in Lystra, and yet some of the issues were the same. Knowledge and ignorance are distinctive themes here (vv. 19, 20, 23, 30), but false views about God and the way to worship him are common to both contexts.”<sup>103</sup>

Finally, we see that Paul's response to the idolatry is anger.<sup>104</sup> This is the same anger that God shares at idolatry (Is 65:3; Hos 8:5).<sup>105</sup> This “searching out” stage is no ordinary fact-finding mission. We are meant to see the context we are entering through God's eyes.

The 12 spies were meant to see that God's word was true: they were about to enter a land which really did flow with milk and honey. They were also meant to see that there was a powerful and numerous enemy. They should have also seen the idolatry of the people in the land. The result then would have been that they saw the land through God's eyes. The result should have been a greater trust in God, both because they knew God could keep his promises, but also because they needed to trust him because they risked defeat at the hand of a deadly enemy and because they risked being led astray into idolatry by the numerous inhabitants of the land.

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<sup>101</sup> Peterson, *Acts*, 487.

<sup>102</sup> David G Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Nottingham: Apollos, 2009) 487.

<sup>103</sup> Peterson, *Acts*, 487.

<sup>104</sup> Block, *Acts*, 560.

<sup>105</sup> Block, *Acts*, 560.

## 4.2. Searching out – first steps

Stepping into a new culture will first involve the need for us to search out where we have been sent to by God. This is true if we have been sent across continents to Africa or Asia. It is true if we have moved from a middle-class suburb to an inner-city community or working-class council estate. It is also true, as I will explain later, if “sending” means that we have been commissioned for Gospel service in our own indigenous community.

How do we go about it? Well, when Sarah and I were first looking to come to Bearwood, we started by looking at the maps. As it turns out, it was a good job that we did. We had ignored the advert to come and work at a church in Bearwood 5 kilometres from Birmingham at first because we imagined a little village out in the country, several miles from the Birmingham boundary. When we looked a bit more closely, we discovered that Bearwood was right at the heart of the West Midlands conurbation. To be sure, we were 5km from the centre of Birmingham: however, that did not place us miles from urban life, but rather slap bang in the middle of it.

The second thing we started to do was to get to know the area by exploring, just like we do on holiday. There are lots of ways to get to know the West Midlands. I recommend that newcomers take a trip on the Number 11 bus which follows the city orbital or take a tram ride across the conurbation passing through the different types of community. Visits to the Black Country Living Museum, Birmingham Museum and Galleries and Dudley Castle and Zoo will give you an insight into the history and culture of the area. A walk along the Soho Road is a cultural experience of vivid colours, temples and gurdwaras, clothes shops, an orchestra of languages and places to stop and eat food from all around the world.

As I mentioned, the internet is a great place to start as you begin to search out an area. Wikipedia tells me that, “The world's oldest working engine, made by Boulton and Watt, the Smethwick Engine, originally stood near Bridge Street, Smethwick.”<sup>106</sup> I can also discover that “Council housing began in Smethwick after 1920 on land previously belonging to the Downing family, whose family home became Holly Lodge High School for Girls in 1922. The mass council house building of the 1920s and 1930s also involved Smethwick's boundaries being extended into part of neighbouring Oldbury in 1928.”<sup>107</sup> I will also find out that notable residents have included the actress Julie Walters; not a bad claim to fame.

Data from the 2011 census is available from the Nomos website. This provides lots of useful information about population, class, economics, ethnicity and religion.<sup>108</sup> Smethwick, where our church is located, has a population of 48,565, of whom only 37.6% are White British with 15.7% coming from an Indian background, 12.4% Pakistani, 11.3% Black Afro-Caribbean and 4.4 % African. Meanwhile, in terms of religious affiliation, 21.8% identify as Muslim and 15.7% as Sikh. The median age in Smethwick is 32 and the mean age 34, indicating a fairly young population with 27.4% under the age of 18. Unemployment stands at 8.3%. Remember that this data is across the whole of the town and the statistics will vary from ward to ward. However, for comparison, in Hempstead and Wigmore, which is a suburban and semi-rural part of Kent, 88.8% of the population are white, the median age is 43, only 2.1% identify as Muslim and unemployment is 2.3%.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smethwick> accessed 07/08/2018

<sup>107</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smethwick> accessed 07/08/2018

<sup>108</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/>

<sup>109</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?compare=1119884093>

Already, we are beginning to learn things that will be important for urban cross-cultural mission. For example, at a very basic level, whilst it is essential to know something of the local history, in our case particularly about the birth of the Industrial Revolution in the Black Country, we will also want to pay close attention to other histories as well. 62% of the local population trace their history and heritage outside of the UK.

Museum visits, bus journeys and internet resources will only get you so far. I'm a strong advocate of getting out and getting to meet people. Two brilliant ways of doing this are door to door work and street contact. Door to Door has been given a bad press in recent times and yet if you are going to meet people who don't know Christians, then there are not many better ways. These points of contact, especially in the early days, are not simply opportunities to get a quick gospel message in and certainly not the time to get into debate about religious issues. What they do offer is an opportunity to start making 1-1, personal contact with people. This is where you start to find out what individual neighbourhoods are like and what makes individual people tick. Whether through a formal survey or informal questions in conversation, you get to find things out about them, how long they've lived in the area, what they enjoy doing, whether they've had previous contact with church. People disclose their fears, whether its of intruders and loss of privacy (just by a simple message in the door window refusing visitors) or of loneliness, illness and death. This is where you find out whether or not the census data is up to date (for example, I expect some of our neighbourhoods to have changed significantly since the 2011 census and others less so). And it's where you begin to find out what they actually believe and value, not just what text books about their religion, ethnicity, age or class tell you they will believe or value.

#### **4.3. Seeing as God Sees**

Earlier when talking about Paul in Athens learning to see the city through God's eyes and the spies in Canaan being able to see the land as the Lord saw it, I mentioned that the stepping in exercise is useful not just for cross cultural missionaries moving into an area, but also for indigenous gospel workers too.

Here are three reasons why. First of all, because we can assume that we know an area because we have always lived there and grown up there and yet not know it as well as we think we do. For example, do we really know our own history? There's lots that I've discovered over the years about my own home city through reading up and visiting museums, just as I was dependent on a second cousin doing some family tree research to learn about my own roots in the London Italian community. Then there are other factors: I may consider myself indigenous based on class and miss subtle but important differences between others and myself. Don't assume that because you are a working class person who grew up on a London Council estate that you will fully get what it means to be a working class lad growing up on an estate in Derby and vice versa.

Secondly, it is useful for all of us to go through this exercise because becoming a Christian changes our cultural perspectives. We may think we may belong, but actually, we will be viewed differently, even with as much suspicion as an outsider and because we will view the world around us differently. This leads to the third point.

This is not just a sociological exercise; it is a theological exercise. Our primary aim when searching out is to see our mission field through God's eyes. He doesn't see estates that need re-generation, slums that need demolishing, gangs that need bringing under the law or immigrants who need language lessons. He sees individual people, made in his image but fallen because of sin, who need the Gospel. This means that the searching out exercise is as much an exercise in prayer and worship

as anything. Take time as you explore and research to give thanks to God for creating this part of his world. Pause to mourn the evidence of sin and the fall all around you. Get down on your knees and pray for the people you will be ministering to that they will find peace, forgiveness and hope in Christ.

## 5 The City

“Future historians will record the twentieth century as the century in which the whole world became one immense city.”<sup>110</sup>

David Smith cites Cox’s comment on the extent of 20<sup>th</sup> Century urbanisation before asking the question as to what extent we can agree with this.

How can this be true when people are still living in rural contexts and much of the planet is still unpopulated?<sup>111</sup>

However, ‘urbanization’ more broadly is “understood to indicate the social, geographical, economic and cultural impact of cities far beyond the physical area which they occupy on the earth’s surface.”<sup>112</sup>

Urban Subversive Fulfilment requires an understanding of what it means to live in cities and conurbations. This will include a history of the roots of city life and especially a Biblical theology giving Scripture’s perspective on the growth of cities.

We will also begin to search out what it means to live in cities, what is it that draws people into them and what the challenges are of living in urban contexts.

### 5.1. Garden to Garden City

In “Seeking a City with Foundations,” Smith traces the story of city life and attitudes to cities by intertwining a Biblical theology of city with the wider historical narrative. The Biblical Theology can be described in terms of movement from garden to garden city:<sup>113</sup>

“It is well known that the story told in the bible begins in a garden and ends in a city. The world as created by God is a rural paradise in which complete harmony exists between human beings and their maker, and between people and all other created beings. God himself is said to have looked on this scene and declared that it was ‘very good’ (Gen 1:31). But in the final chapter of the Bible, after the long and complex story that has unfolded since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, it is a city that comes into view as the ultimate goal and hope of human history. In this vision the glory of God is no longer displayed in a natural wilderness, but rather shines with great brilliance in a vast and holy city (Rev. 21:10-11).”<sup>114</sup>

### 5.2. A tale of two cities

The story of that movement begins early in the Bible. Cain is the first city builder (Genesis 3:17). The fact that this happens after the Fall and that the first city builder is Cain, the guilty and shamed murderer, rather than Seth, the father of the godly line, creates tension. Smith describes Genesis 3 as pregnant with meaning:

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<sup>110</sup>Cox, cited in Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 17.

<sup>111</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 17.

<sup>112</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 18.

<sup>113</sup> It is better to describe the new Jerusalem as “garden city” rather than mere city given the focus on the tree lined river in Revelation 21-22.

<sup>114</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 19.

“Cities appear very early in the story told in the Bible. In the creation narratives in Genesis, no sooner have human beings been banished ‘east of Eden’ than we come across a pregnant sentence informing us that ‘Cain was then building a city’ (Gen 4:17).”<sup>115</sup>

This suggests that we are meant to view the city negatively and here lies the tension. Are we to view the building of cities as progress towards the first Jerusalem which will be the dwelling place of God’s king and further on to the New Jerusalem where God’s people will gather around his throne for the wedding feast of the lamb, or are we to associate them with that first city and its roots in sin, shame and guilt, a fall from the ideal of Eden?

This tension has historically been reflected in theology and philosophy. On the one hand, we are presented with a negative view of city building which suggests that,

“Civilization comes with burdensome ‘discontents’ and to exist outside of Eden is to live under the curse of God.”<sup>116</sup>

This links to contemporary sociological/political views of cities as places for the benefit of minorities to oppress majority.<sup>117</sup> Smith will argue that our theology of the city must engage with justice questions. Cities provide “the context for a struggle between forces that work for human liberation on the one hand, and those that result in dehumanization on the other.”<sup>118</sup>

However, cities cause tension simply because of their very nature, as Allen, Massey and Pryke argue. Their thesis is that “Cities by their nature are both places of ‘settlement and stability’ and ‘movement and mobility.’”<sup>119</sup> In their opinion, this is a significant cause of the tension that city dwellers experience.<sup>120</sup> This tension is caused by a number of factors, including firstly,

“...the movement of people to the city and the settlement in particular the juxtaposition of different cultures, races, ages and classes in urban settings, often in close proximity, prompts the question of how difference is negotiated in the city.”<sup>121</sup>

The juxtaposition of people from different background within such close proximity results in

“...a meeting of differences that can lead just as easily to conflict and intolerance as it does to respect and mutual recognition.”<sup>122</sup>

Secondly, tension is experienced simply through the pace, intensity and business of city life.<sup>123</sup> In contemporary cities, we would also want to add to this the problem of pollution including noise, light and fuel pollution. Cities are also often afflicted by high crime rates.

Thirdly, because cities are often inhabited by people who have moved there from other cities, towns and villages to study or in search of work, housing or refuge, loneliness is also a major factor.

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<sup>115</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 49.

<sup>116</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 19.

<sup>117</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 19.

<sup>118</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 30.

<sup>119</sup> Allen, Massey & Pryke, “Introduction: Unsettling Cities,” 3.

<sup>120</sup> Allen, Massey & Pryke, “Introduction: Unsettling Cities,” 3.

<sup>121</sup> Allen, Massey & Pryke, “Introduction: Unsettling Cities,” 3.

<sup>122</sup> Allen, Massey & Pryke, “Introduction: Unsettling Cities,” 3-4.

<sup>123</sup> Allen, Massey & Pryke, “Introduction: Unsettling Cities,” 4.

“In the big cities of the world... the experience of cityness may manifest itself through isolation and anxiety as much as it may do through creativeness and liveliness.”<sup>124</sup>

On the other hand, there has also been a strong historical emphasis on the positive theology associated with the move from Eden to “New Jerusalem.”<sup>125</sup> Smith explains,

“In the fifth century, faced with the collapse of Rome, Augustine made the city the central theme of his theological reflection and produced work of such depth and wisdom that it shaped Christian thinking for centuries to come. His was like ours, an age of crisis in which ‘civilization’ appeared to be under threat. Faced with this situation Augustine refused to adopt an anti-urban stance but developed his famous model of two contrasting cities, one of which was dysfunctional and doomed, while the other promised an urban future characterized by love, justice and community.”<sup>126</sup>

This means that the tension we are meant to observe is not so much between cities and other contexts, such as rural living, as between two types of city or two experiences of City. Whilst Allen Massey and Pryke document the negative aspects of city life in terms of isolation and stress, they also view cities as “essentially open, mobile, mixed places.”<sup>127</sup> Cities are centres of life and activity because,

“If cities now are where most people happen to be, then that is above all because cities are open and global in character. They represent what many societies have become and what others have long been: sites at which a multitude of social relationships and ties intersect, giving a sense of their worldly nature, the different times and mixes they embody, and a sense of resultant intensity and diversity.”<sup>128</sup>

The result of this is,

“that they are places where something is always going on. The dynamism of cities, the economic and cultural vitality that is often associated with the dense clustering of peoples, cultures and activities is in many ways a testament to what comes together and blends with particular city spaces.”<sup>129</sup>

Smith, citing Judge and Watson, observes,

“Cities are places which enable the realization of the self, or conversely, cities separate the self from creativity and imagination in spaces of alienation and estrangement. There is a long Western tradition of representing cities as both dystopia or hell – Sodom the city of corruption – or utopia or heaven – Athens the city of enlightenment, democracy and reason.”<sup>130</sup>

He then brings us back to the Biblical image of two types of city, commenting that,

“If we substitute the cities of Sodom and Athens in this statement with those of Babylon and Jerusalem, we identify a tension between two ‘opposing imaginaries’ of the city that run

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<sup>124</sup> Allen, Massey & Pryke, “Introduction: Unsettling Cities,” 2.

<sup>125</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 23.

<sup>126</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 24.

<sup>127</sup> Allen, Massey & Pryke, “Introduction: Unsettling Cities,” 1.

<sup>128</sup> Allen, Massey & Pryke, “Introduction: Unsettling Cities,” 1.

<sup>129</sup> Allen, Massey & Pryke, “Introduction: Unsettling Cities,” 2.

<sup>130</sup> Bridge and Watson, cited in Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 40.

through the narrative of the Bible. There are two representative cities, one is corrupt and evil, a place of violence and oppression which is constantly threatened with judgement and destruction; the other is the city of God, shaped by a radically alternative vision of urban life and possibility, and the object of faith and hope.”<sup>131</sup>

### 5.3. Babylon and Ur

The story of the city continues after the flood with the development of civilisation in the great cities of Mesopotamia. The Babylonians told the story of their city through the Enuma Elish which describes the elevation of Marduk to the position of the chief god in their pantheon. Smith identified a fascinating link between religion and politics here.

“What is of particular interest to us is the fact that this elevation of Marduk by the Babylonian priesthood responsible for the composition of the epic is paralleled by the praising of the *city* Babylon, the dwelling place of Marduk and the site at which rituals honouring him were enacted. Enuma Elish thus had a politico-religious purpose and functioned as a means to strengthen the claim of the city of Babylon ‘to supremacy over all the cities of the land’.”<sup>132</sup>

An ancient city’s status was related to the status of the god behind its foundation and presumably its prosperity was related to the worship of that god and its ongoing status and success in rivalry with the other gods.

“The city was a sacred sphere, an enclosed and protected area chosen by the gods and, provided the occupants were faithful in their ritual obligations, guaranteed security from destructive forces – human, animal and spiritual – which threatened those who dwelt beyond the encircling walls.”<sup>133</sup>

If a city fell into decline, then that suggested either that the inhabitants of the city were being punished for failing to honour their god or that the god’s own fortunes were in decline. Hence, the fall of Jerusalem would have been seen by the Babylonians as evidence of the superiority of Marduk over Yahweh. The Bible responds in two ways. First of all, it insists that Babylon’s foundations were not found in the triumph of a Mesopotamian god but in the folly of men as they sought to rebel against the one true God. Babylon was in fact Babel. Its name pointed not to the gateway to heaven and the gods, but to the confusion or babble of languages that resulted from their arrogance.

Secondly, the prophets insist that Jerusalem fell because of the sin of the people. Yahweh himself had brought judgement from the North.<sup>134</sup> God had in fact left and taken his blessing from the Temple and the City but was very much alive and at work among the exiles in Babylon.<sup>135</sup>

If one of the founding centres of civilisation is portrayed as a place of rebellion, folly and human weakness, the other great city of Mesopotamia, Ur is the city from which God calls Abram in order to bless him, give him a land and multiply his descendants.<sup>136</sup> However, we are not meant to see Abram’s journey to Haran and then Canaan as a flight from the city to rural existence, even though

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<sup>131</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 40.

<sup>132</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 52.

<sup>133</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 53.

<sup>134</sup> Provide references to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and relevant commentaries. See e.g. Jeremiah 5 and Ezekiel 16.

<sup>135</sup> C.f. Ezekiel 1 and Ezekiel 10.

<sup>136</sup> Genesis 12:1-3.

that may have been his primary experience of the land. We know from Hebrews that Abram was looking forward to a future, fulfilled promise and that fulfilled promise centred on another city.<sup>137</sup> Smith puts it this way:

“Abram abandoned Ur and later moved on from Haran wandering as a landless pilgrim across the ancient world because ‘he was looking for a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.’ Does this imply that the patriarch had come to doubt the mythical foundations of the cities in which he grew up?”<sup>138</sup>

#### 5.4. Rome

Another significant development in the history of the city was the growth of the Greco city states such as Corinth and Athens where early forms of democracy flourished. This is where we really begin to think about what it means to be a citizen: someone who belongs to the city and has both rights and responsibilities towards it. Philosophically, the Greeks were looking for the good city.<sup>139</sup>

“For Plato and Aristotle then, the fundamental question concerned the purpose of the city: for what end does it exist, and what is required for it to fulfil this objective? The answer was related to what constituted ‘goodness’ and, while this might be the subject of legitimate discussion, it was clear that a good society would be one in which the citizens flourished as members together of a virtuous community.”<sup>140</sup>

The ultimate example of human city building both historically and theologically is Rome. Smith writes,

“The era of the great urban empires reached its culminating point in the rise to world dominance of Rome, centred on a city which both in its size and glory exceeded any urban settlement previously seen on earth. This too was a ‘sacred city’ in the sense that it came to be viewed as the outcome of prophecies which placed Rome at the centre of the purposes of the gods.”<sup>141</sup>

In the New Testament, Rome is both the representative city of opposition to God and his people, so that John in his Revelation figuratively labels the city on seven hills as “Babylon” and at the same time, the goal of Gospel mission as Paul makes it his aim to reach there, to appear before the Emperor.<sup>142</sup> Babylon and Rome are presented as in rivalry with Jerusalem. Although it looks like Rome has the advantage of wealth and power, it is, in fact, rotten and corrupt. God’s city, the New Jerusalem, will triumph in the end.<sup>143</sup>

#### 5.5. The modern city

Smith brings the story of the city up to date, noting the concern of reformers like Calvin for the good of the city and the good city with Geneva intended as a model of a “a holy commonwealth.”<sup>144</sup> Fascinatingly, he observes that, alongside the Christian development of cities,

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<sup>137</sup>Hebrews 11:8-9.

<sup>138</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 53. C.f. Hebrews 11:10.

<sup>139</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 57.

<sup>140</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 57.

<sup>141</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 55.

<sup>142</sup> Revelation 17:9; Revelation 18. Acts 25:9-12; Acts 27:23-24 & Romans 1:8-10.

<sup>143</sup> Revelation 17:15-18 & Revelation 18.

<sup>144</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 63.

“From its beginnings Islam was a profoundly urban religion, bearing a vision for social and political life shaped by the reign of God.”<sup>145</sup>

This has important implications for our engagement with immigrants from Muslim background in our cities as well as for Public Theology as we trace out the implications from this for Muslims engaging in civic life as council members and mayors.

It was of course the Industrial Revolution that led to the explosion of urbanisation. Again, there are religious roots and implications for this with Weber famously linking the industrial revolution, capitalism and urbanisation to the Protestant work ethic.<sup>146</sup>

## **5.6. Conclusion**

Even a brief history of the city and engagement with philosophical and theological analysis of urbanisation shows that cities are complex entities. On the one hand, cities can be places of joy and safety. The Jerusalem of David and Solomon was intended to be a secure stronghold, the centre of Yahweh worship and a model for community life in the presence of the true and living God.<sup>147</sup> As we continue to “search out,” we will see how the idealised city reflects something of the unfulfilled desires, dreams and felt needs of people. We will discover that a Biblical theology of the City means that those hope for community, for safety and for meaning can be found in Christ. We will also see how cities and city life are distorted by idolatry. Cities are places of danger and harm. Our understanding of “the city” needs to be subverted so that we turn from idolatrous city life and put our trust in the true “God of this city.”

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<sup>145</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 59.

<sup>146</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 67.

<sup>147</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 67.

## 6 Identity

In this chapter, we will start to focus on the people who live in Urban Britain and on their cultures and communities. We will be thinking about what it means to live in the city. We will start by picking up on general experience of urban life and then will focus on particular aspects of inner city and estate culture. This will include some commentary on issues to do with ethnicity and then a more detailed look at questions to do with class and particularly working class and council estate identity.

### 6.1. Identity and unsettling cities

One of the reasons we gave space in the last chapter to thinking about the history of city life is that our identity is shaped to some extent by the environment around us. According to Allen, Massey and Pryke, cities are open spaces where people meet and mix.

“If cities now are where most people happen to be, then that is above all because cities are open and global in character. They represent what many societies have become and what others have long been: sites at which a multitude of social relationships and ties intersect, giving a sense of their worldly nature, the different times and mixes they embody, and a sense of resultant intensity and diversity.”<sup>148</sup>

My own experience of growing up in Bradford was of a diverse city where people from different backgrounds rubbed shoulder to shoulder with one another. The diversity became more obvious as I grew older. Our little primary school was fairly mono-cultural, although there was some engagement with Pakistani children for a period due to a policy known colloquially as “bussing.” This meant that ethnic minority children from inner city areas such as Manningham were dispersed by bus out to a variety of schools across the district. Later, this policy was seen as demeaning and no doubt an economic drain and so it ended, leading to a greater concentration of Asian children in inner city schools. This provoked further controversy in the early 1980s when one school headteacher, Ray Honeyford, wrote an article for the Salisbury Review bemoaning the takeover of schools by non-indigenous ethnic groups and the lack of spoken English in the playground. He believed that the policies associated with multi-culturalism at that time were having a negative effect on education.<sup>149</sup>

Secondary school saw a greater diversity of cultures. Sitting next to a Pakistani origin friend at school provided plenty of distraction from Chemistry as we debated Islam and Christianity. Meanwhile, each Sunday, our family would join in with the Chinese Christian Church that used our church building in the centre of Bradford.

City life for me means noise and bustle. It means never been far from anything. A short bus ride into town meant that shops and entertainment, the cinema, theatre etc were within easy reach. City life also meant the tribalism that came with supporting Bradford City instead of Leeds United or Huddersfield Town. But urban life did not mean an absence of greenery: within a short distance were parks, playing fields, golf courses and a stroll through Judy Woods to collect conkers or see the bluebells in bloom. City life also meant a high level of loyalty that comes with local identity – hence the decision to support my local team.

Cities are also places where people experience isolation, discrimination and injustice. First of all, for many people, life is lonely. This is particularly so if they have moved to the city from elsewhere, particularly from smaller towns and villages where they experienced tightknit community life. The city becomes the place where you don’t know anyone, where you become invisible to others.

Cities can be places of fear, especially in the context of rising crime, but also due to racial prejudice and the fear of “otherness.” Amin and Graham observe how whilst,

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<sup>148</sup> Allen, Massey & Pryke, “Introduction: Unsettling Cities,” 1.

<sup>149</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray\\_Honeyford](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ray_Honeyford)

“Streets, parks, squares, shopping areas, cafes and restaurants are often places of connection where different relationship webs meet and overlap,”<sup>150</sup>

we are seeing a retreat from and segregation of those public spaces. This can be seen in the growth of gated communities where people rent or buy in private complexes with controlled access.

It's seen also in the security access required to get into council flats as well. It's also seen in the surveillance culture which results in CCTV camera observation. This means that,

“the tensions associated with this juxtaposition of difference, perceived or real (such as the fear of crime or violence, racial intolerance, uncertainty and insecurity) often put into question the very definition and usage of the phrase ‘urban public space’. The once common understanding of public space as a shared space or arena for social interaction can no longer be taken for granted.”<sup>151</sup>

The result is that, “some have suggested that public spaces are being re-engineered as places of surveillance from which threatening groups are excluded.”<sup>152</sup>

As a Christian, I would suggest that this has huge theological and missiological implications. First of all, in a world where surveillance is ubiquitous and associated with guilt, shame and authoritarian power, this will affect how people hear our description of the God who sees and knows everything. Secondly, if public spaces are places of fear and segregation, then this will affect how people feel about coming to public worship. In that our church buildings are public places and our services are public events, this may not always mean that their public nature results in them being seen as welcoming and accessible.

Cities are also places where people experience injustice, prejudice and oppression. McDonnell focuses on this in terms of gender. Women experience harassment and assault in public spaces.<sup>153</sup> This starts from an early age with 5500 sexual assaults in schools reported every year.<sup>154</sup> McDonnell argues that this creates a culture where women are seen as dependent on men for status and safety.<sup>155</sup> It is also an environment where women are constrained and restricted, where it is not safe or culturally acceptable for them to be outdoors outside of daylight hours. She comments that,

“A clear illustration can be seen in the judgements made in cases of rape and harassment, when judges have sometimes argued that women should remain indoors for their own protection. At times when men who are thought to be dangerous are ‘on the loose’ or at large, there are often calls for curfews for women and girls.”<sup>156</sup>

It is this sense of an informal curfew which has led to university student unions running “Reclaim the Night” campaigns.<sup>157</sup>

Smith links the experience of the Israelites in Egypt with the experience of oppressed minorities in the city. The Israelites were press ganged into service for Pharaoh and forced to build his cities for him.<sup>158</sup> The economic power of Rome was also dependent on slavery just as modern industrial cities, especially port cities such as Liverpool and Bristol depended on the African slave trade for their

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<sup>150</sup> Amin & Graham, “Cities of Connection and Disconnection,” 16.

<sup>151</sup> Amin & Graham, “Cities of Connection and Disconnection,” 16.

<sup>152</sup> Amin & Graham, “Cities of Connection and Disconnection,” 16.

<sup>153</sup> Linda McDonnell, “City life and difference: negotiating diversity”, 95-136 in *Unsettling Cities* (Ed John Allen, Doreen Massey and Michael Pryke. London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>154</sup> <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6054355/Schoolboy-rapists-think-girls-crying-foreplay.html>

<sup>155</sup> McDonnell, “City life and difference: negotiating diversity,” 105.

<sup>156</sup> McDonnell, “City life and difference: negotiating diversity,” 105.

<sup>157</sup> McDonnell, “City life and difference: negotiating diversity,” 105.

<sup>158</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 129.

wealth. This type of injustice arises because of idolatry. A major idol is what Smith refers to as “Economistic” practices. This is a label for “economic activity... separated from ethical control.”<sup>159</sup>

## 6.2. The City and the Immigrant

I’m from an immigrant background, but you wouldn’t know it to look at me. My great grandfather was called Luigi Guilliani and he belonged to the Italian immigrant community in East London. Great grandfather Luigi moved to Birmingham and changed his name to Louis Williams. White immigrants have the advantage that they can learn the language, change their names and blend in, an option not open to all.

To be an immigrant in the UK is to be viewed with suspicion. Politicians talk about the importance of controlling the borders – one of the central arguments given for Brexit during the 2016 referendum campaign. Tabloid newspapers use lurid language to talk about the dangers of our country being swamped by foreigners coming here to steal our jobs whilst simultaneously enjoying the easy life living off our generous welfare state.

Our cities are being transformed by immigration. At the 2011 census, only 53.1% of the Birmingham population was “White British”<sup>160</sup> with 26.6% being of Asian origin and 9% Black. In neighbouring Leicester, the figures are 45.1% British and 37.1% Asian<sup>161</sup> whilst in my home city, Bradford, 63.9% are White British and 26.8% from an Asian background.<sup>162</sup> Many of those from Asian and Black backgrounds will be second or third generation UK residents. Whilst only 53.1% of the Birmingham population is White British, 77.8% were born in the UK.<sup>163</sup>

Given the strongly negative, hostile even, reactions we seen to immigrant and other ethnic groups, it is important to remember why there is such a large and diverse immigrant community within our cities. Whilst there have been significant numbers of refugees over the years, whether those fleeing the Syrian conflict today, Afghanistan and Iraq in the previous decade, or Vietnam in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the reality is that many immigrant families are here because we needed them and we invited them to come.

“Pakistani migrants who came to Britain after the war found employment in the textile industries of Lancashire, Yorkshire, Manchester and Bradford, cars and engineering factories in the West Midlands, and Birmingham, and growing light industrial estates in places like Luton and Slough. After the Mangla dam was built in 1966 which submerged large parts of the Mirpur district, emigration from that area accelerated.”<sup>164</sup>

They came to fill the jobs that we either did not have people to fill or that British workers no longer wanted to do. This was recently highlighted through the “Windrush Generation” controversy when it emerged that many Afro-Caribbean families were under pressure to return to the Caribbean due to an absence of official paperwork to support their right to live in the UK.

“Those arriving in the UK between 1948 and 1971 from Caribbean countries have been labelled the Windrush generation. This is a reference to the ship MV Empire Windrush, which arrived at Tilbury Docks, Essex, on 22 June 1948, bringing workers from Jamaica,

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<sup>159</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 219.

<sup>160</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?compare=1946157186>

<sup>161</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?compare=1946157130>

<sup>162</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?compare=1946157124>

<sup>163</sup> <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?compare=1946157186>

<sup>164</sup> <http://www.striking-women.org/module/map-major-south-asian-migration-flows/post-1947-migration-uk-india-bangladesh-pakistan-and> accessed 13-08-2018.

Trinidad and Tobago and other islands, as a response to post-war labour shortages in the UK.”<sup>165</sup>

Like those from the Indian sub-continent,

“Many of the arrivals became manual workers, cleaners, drivers and nurses – and some broke new ground in representing black Britons in society.”<sup>166</sup>

They came because of the need here but they also came because of historic ties to the UK. Observe this quote closely:

“It was following the Second World War, the break-up of the British Empire and the independence of Pakistan, that Pakistani immigration to the United Kingdom increased, especially during the 1950s and 1960s. This was made easier as Pakistan was a member of the Commonwealth. Pakistani immigrants helped to resolve labour shortages in the British steel, textile and engineering industries. Doctors from Pakistan were recruited by the National Health Service in the 1960s.”<sup>167</sup>

And then there is this:

“A large majority of Pakistani migrants in the UK originate from Mirpur in Kashmir, which has a long history of out-migration. Sailors from Mirpur found work as engine-room stokers on British ships sailing out of Bombay and Karachi, some of whom settled in the UK in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.”<sup>168</sup>

The link to “The Commonwealth” and to British trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is perhaps a gentle way of reminding us that the original link was the British Empire. Furthermore, many of the Afro-Caribbean immigrants are the direct descendants of slaves who were traded by British businessmen, transported in British ships and made to work on British plantations in Jamaica. Politician David Lammy reflected this point powerfully in a speech on the 26<sup>th</sup> April 2018 in the House of Commons.

“The Windrush story does not begin in 1948; the Windrush story begins in the 17th century, when British slave traders stole 12 million Africans from their homes, took them to the Caribbean and sold them into slavery to work on plantations. The wealth of this country was built on the backs of the ancestors of the Windrush generation. We are here today because you were there.

My ancestors were British subjects, but they were not British subjects because they came to Britain. They were British subjects because Britain came to them, took them across the Atlantic, colonised them, sold them into slavery, profited from their labour and made them British subjects. That is why I am here, and it is why the Windrush generation are here.

There is no British history without the history of the empire. As the late, great Stuart Hall put it: “I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea.”

The Windrush children are imprisoned in this country—as we have seen of those who have been detained—centuries after their ancestors were shackled and taken across the ocean in

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<sup>165</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43782241> accessed 13-08-2018

<sup>166</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43782241> accessed 13-08-2018

<sup>167</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British\\_Pakistanis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Pakistanis) accessed 13-08-2018.

<sup>168</sup> <http://www.striking-women.org/module/map-major-south-asian-migration-flows/post-1947-migration-uk-india-bangladesh-pakistan-and> accessed 13-08-2013.

slave ships. They are pensioners imprisoned in their own country. That is a disgrace, and it happened here because of a refusal to remember our history.”<sup>169</sup>

Often those very people from the Windrush generation came off the boats to be greeted by signs in guesthouse windows declaring “No dogs, no blacks.” Sadly, the church does not seem to have done any better in terms of welcoming and including. Anecdotally, I’ve heard stories of believers turning up to church and being treated as the servant class. I remember my grandmother befriending a couple of Jamaican ladies who joined the little Methodist church where she worshipped. Nana was deeply disturbed to be asked by other church members about her “darkie friends.”

If there was racism and rejection, there was also the challenge of how different cultures could worship together. Some Christians joined with existing churches but found that they struggled with what felt like a colder, more formal style of worship as well as an English focus on strict time keeping. Here, W.D. Evans, who was the pastor of Sunbridge Road Mission, an inner-city mission hall, for over 20 years, describes his experience of interaction with Afro-Caribbean immigration:

“Not long after I came to Sunbridge Road, the West Indian people started to come and live in our country, quite a number of them coming to live in Bradford. First the men would come. They would get a job, then they would get a flat, and then they would send for their families to come and join them. One problem that they had when they arrived was the question of validity of their marriages. If they hadn’t registered their marriages at home, then they weren’t valid in this country. The fact that they were not legally married was a great trouble to them. They used to go straight to the Registry Office when the wife arrived and they would go through the words of the marriage ceremony. They would get their certificate, which should have made things alright for them. However, they thought they were already married, and although they didn’t object to having to go through a marriage ceremony again, they thought that if they had to get married again, then they ought to get married in church.”<sup>170</sup>

The result of this was that Pastor Evans got involved in conducting church wedding services. Many wanted to be part of a church but whilst some families joined Sunbridge Road Mission, the majority didn’t. Pastor Evans continues to explain as follows:

“There was a church that was going to be closed down. We managed to work out a way for them to buy the building on rental purchase and they established themselves as a West Indian Church. The reason that they really needed their own church was one which we might find difficult to understand. They found the time element connected with our churches difficult to cope with. They liked to start a service when they were ready, not at 10:30am or 6:00pm. They also liked to go on worshipping until they were tired and not finish after an hour or so as we did. I acted as an adviser to them. Their leaders used to come into my study with the elders. We used to talk over their problems and I used to try to sort them out. I did all the administrative work, and all the dedications and of course the funerals. I did this for many years until they were able to cope on their own.”<sup>171</sup>

This example describes a similar experience for churches across the country. Whilst some Afro-Caribbeans joined and persevered with existing churches, as described by Pastor Evans, many opted for Black majority churches such as the New Testament Church of God of Prophecy. The result was the development of a cultural identity which included church life.

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<sup>169</sup> <https://www.davidlammy.co.uk/single-post/2018/05/29/Speeches-on-the-Windrush-crisis-in-Parliament> accessed 13-08-2018.

<sup>170</sup> W. Douglas Evans, *My Lord, My Rock, My Life* (Carnforth, Lancs.: ECC Publications, 1993), 84-85.

<sup>171</sup> Evans, *My Lord, My Rock, My Life*, 85.

The United States has experienced even more extreme forms of segregation both in secular life and in the church. John Piper, in his book “Bloodlines,” describes how,

“In 1962 my home church voted not to allow blacks into the services. The rationale as I remember was that in the heated context of the civil rights era, the only reason blacks would want to be there would be political, which is not what church is for. As I recall, my mother was the lone voice on that Wednesday night to vote no on this motion. I could be wrong about that. But she did vote no.”<sup>172</sup>

Piper’s mother seemingly fought a lone battle against this injustice. He goes on to describe what happened at his sister’s wedding:

“In December of that year, my sister was married in the church and my mother invited Lucy’s whole family to come. And they came. I remember an incredibly tense and awkward moment as they came in the door of the foyer (which must have taken incredible courage). The ushers did not know what to do. One was about to usher them up to the balcony (which had barely been used since the church was built). My mother – all five feet two inches of her – intervened and by herself took them by the arm and seated them on the main floor of the sanctuary.”<sup>173</sup>

I refer to the US context here because we cannot avoid our interconnectedness and the relationship that there is between US and UK evangelicalism. This means that the experiences of black people in the States will affect perceptions in Britain.

What does it mean to live as an immigrant or as a second/third generation UK resident from an ethnic minority background? Some helpful clues are provided by literature. The play, “A Taste of Honey” shows something of the racial prejudice and suspicion that existed through the 60s and 70s. The story describes a single mother’s experience of shame. That shame is heightened because the absent father was a Nigerian sailor as demonstrated in the scene where Jo (the mum) reveals the truth to Helen (her mum) about the child’s identity.

JO: Helen

HELEN: Yes

JO: My baby may be black

HELEN: You what Love?

JO: My baby will be black

HELEN: Oh don’t be silly Jo, you’ll be giving yourself nightmares.

JO: But it’s true. He was black.

HELEN: Who?

JO: Jimmie

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<sup>172</sup> John Piper, *Bloodlines, Race, Cross and The Christian* (Wheaton IL.: Crossway, 2011), 34.

<sup>173</sup> John Piper, *Bloodlines*, 34. Lucy was a black, domestic help at the Piper family home. Piper earlier acknowledges that this type of domestic help was in fact demeaning. Friendliness towards the family did not stop his racist thoughts and behaviour or that the relationship depended on a social and ethnic hierarchy. Piper, *Bloodlines*, 33.

HELEN: You mean to say... that sailor was a black man?... Oh my God, I'll have to have a drink.<sup>174</sup>

Other fictional works tell the story of immigration and race from the immigrant's perspective including "Brick Lane" and "Anita and Me." The former explores the challenges facing a young Bangladeshi woman sent to London for an arranged marriage, whilst the latter tells the story of a second generation girl growing up with an English friend. Both stories touch on violence and racism.

More recently, "The Good Immigrant" has brought together autobiographical stories and reflections from a variety of writers. This includes Variadzo's experience of growing up mixed race. She observes that,

"With most people, their race is perhaps the only aspect of their identity guaranteed from the moment of conception. They'll be whatever race their parents are and stay being that for life. For mixed-race children, it's a little more confusing. We don't always come out looking like our parents and often we'll be racialised differently to them."<sup>175</sup>

This led to a period of confusion and identity crisis for her growing up:

"I spent the first decade of my life unaware that I was black and spent the decade that followed not being very good at it. They had a word for this in the playground, 'Oreo': a kid that was black on the outside and white on the inside."<sup>176</sup>

Eventually, she concludes that her cultural identity is "black" because this conveys things that the description "mixed race never could."

"As a term, mixed race could never fully illustrate my experiences. It described nothing, the act of being not one thing or another. To be a mix of races is to be raceless, it implied, and yet that had never been my reality. My race was distinct and visible, the fact that defined me as different to the rest of my classmates. Mixedness alone couldn't describe this difference."<sup>177</sup>

Whilst immigrants have not always been greeted with hostility, this does not mean that they've experienced full and genuine welcome and inclusion. Indeed, part of the experience described by some in "The Good Immigrant" is best described as curiosity. Variadzo comments,

"For as long as black people have been visible to the Western eye, our collective role has been that of the entertainer. From being ogled at in the human zoos of the nineteenth century to now, where our television sets still mostly show us in limiting stereotypical roles: the thug, the hooker, the fresh-off-the boat minister, there is much fun to be had observing our queer primitive ways."<sup>178</sup>

I guess another example of this curiosity factor can be seen in the refusal of English people to learn to pronounce foreign names, insisting instead on either nicknames or alternative English names. It's seen in the refusal to accept that a person of colour may well have been born here and lived here all their life. Shuklah comments,

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<sup>174</sup> Shelagh Delaney, *A Taste of Honey* (1959. Repr. Methuen Student edition. London: Methuen Publishing Limited, 1982), 86.

<sup>175</sup> Variadzo, "A guide to being black," 10.

<sup>176</sup> Variadzo, "A guide to being black," 10.

<sup>177</sup> Variadzo, "A guide to being black," 12.

<sup>178</sup> Variadzo, "A guide to being black," 18.

“Because of your skin tone, people will ask you where you’re from. If you say Bristol, they’ll ask where your parents are from.”<sup>179</sup>

A further example can be seen in the appropriation of language and cultural symbols by trends and fashions, often ignorantly. For example, consider the greeting, “Namaste.” Shuklah explains,

“Namaste means I’m bowing to you. It’s a customary greeting. It’s a respectful salutation. It has become a bastardised metaphor for spiritualism. It’s white people doing yoga, throwing up prayer hands chanting ‘AUM’ and saying ‘namaste’ like their third eyes are being opened and they can peer directly into the nucleus of spirituality.”<sup>180</sup>

He goes on to comment on the way that words find their way into the English language which in their original context have basic, everyday meanings but are now used to suggest something exotic and unusual.

“One of the many online arguments I’ve had about the importance of language, how language can hurt, has been about tea. Chai means tea. Chai tea means tea tea. The number of times you see this on a menu makes you wonder why people can’t be bothered to do their research. Like naan bread too. Bread bread.”<sup>181</sup>

Finally, there is the way that asylum seekers are viewed and treated. First of all, there’s the risk that all immigration is conflated together so that all immigrants are viewed as basically the same. Secondly, there are presuppositions about asylum seekers. This includes the hostile presumption that all asylum seekers are bogus and simply here to get what they can out of the state, benefits, free education, NHS care etc. It also includes the assumption that because asylum seekers have experienced persecution that they must always be treated as victims, unable to think, speak or act for themselves, they become dependent upon charitable handouts. My friend “J” constantly challenges these assumptions. Rather than looking for help, he and his wife have sought to engage with the community by starting a church congregation, opening their home to show hospitality, providing ESOL classes for other refugees and providing Christmas Day dinner for local homeless, elderly and lonely people.

All of these experiences of life in the UK help to shape individual identities. They will also affect how people relate to us and our faith. If Christianity is seen as imperialistic, whether that imperialism has been accompanied by outright hostility or simply a patronising air of superiority, then obstacles are in place before we can share the Gospel. Not only that, but here is one of those examples where it is our own cultural idolatry that needs to be challenged if we are going to be fruitful in gospel ministry.

### **6.3. Identity and Class**

Alongside ethnicity, class is one of the key factors we tend to think about when looking at urban mission. The British attitude to class is best described as “complex.” Recently, I saw someone ask people on Twitter to complete two statements: “Someone is working class when...” and “Someone is middle class when...”<sup>182</sup> I think it was intended as a serious question (Andy Prime was preparing for a talk at a national conference on the subject of Gospel and Class) but several of the immediate responses he got back were jokey in tone. Class is something we are not comfortable about. It’s something we joke about. So answers to the statement “Someone is working class when...” included:

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<sup>179</sup> Nikesh Shuklah, “Namaste” Pages 1-9 in *The Good Immigrant* (Ed Nikesh Shuklah. London: Unbound, 2016), 1.

<sup>180</sup> Shuklah, “Namaste,” 1.

<sup>181</sup> Shuklah, “Namaste,” 7.

<sup>182</sup> <https://twitter.com/revandyprime/status/1027986799111680012> accessed 16-08-2018

"Family gatherings ended in an arrest..."

"People who love you act like they hate you"

"They breakfast, dinner and tea"<sup>183</sup>

The question also elicited some more serious and expansive responses including

"Working class mates are more loyal and more aggressive – like siblings. There's no pretence in friendships and people walk in on you as you are. There are "insiders" that you trust like family and "outsiders" who you are suspicious of."<sup>184</sup>

Meanwhile, to another person, "working class" meant

"whip-rounds, hand me downs, over-share, toast 4 tea, fierce loyalty, bingo, caravan breaks, saving all year for christmas, never having enough always wanting more. inverted snobbery, fighting for family. work hard play hard. fish fingers."

On the other hand, the following statements were offered for middle class people:

"Middle class people have been to university as have most of their friends. They've got some savings in the bank, take foreign holidays and have a plan at least to own their own home.

"They own property. They have a degree or are a recognised professional. They have inherited wealth They have been asked by inland revenue to complete a self assessment tax return."

"...they say 'that's interesting' instead of 'I don't like that.'"

And...

"They get angry when you suggest they aren't working class."<sup>185</sup>

This final comment reflects something about the awkwardness of class I suggested above. The same person observed,

"Someone is working class when... they don't talk about class."<sup>186</sup>

Class is something that comes with perceived, negative stereotypes. Class is also something that "others are obsessed about." It is what sociologists talk about, but not something that we want to make a big deal about. Mike Savage observes,

"As long ago as the 1960s – when British class divisions have usually been seen as very strong – even then half the population did not see themselves as belonging to a social class."<sup>187</sup>

This perception is backed up by Savage's own, more contemporary research. He explains,

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<sup>183</sup> <https://twitter.com/spudgunpreacher/status/1027997866546094080>

<sup>184</sup> [https://twitter.com/Windy\\_London/status/1028075771078864897](https://twitter.com/Windy_London/status/1028075771078864897)

<sup>185</sup> <https://twitter.com/revandyprime/status/1027986800864894976>

<sup>186</sup> <https://twitter.com/kouya/status/1028182681400619008> accessed 16-08-2018

<sup>187</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 25-26.

“Of course, many people have always resisted the value of thinking in terms of these class categories, which might be seen as divisive or simplistic. Historical and sociological studies have demonstrated long-term ambivalence about how far people see themselves as belonging to classes – of any kind. Our own in-depth interviews with two hundred Manchester residents in the early 2000s suggested that two-thirds of those we talked to were ambivalent in seeing themselves as belonging to any kind of class.”<sup>188</sup>

This means that class is a controversial subject, not just politically but socially and academically too. Savage was part of a group of academics who worked with the BBC to produce the Great British Class Survey. He observes,

“The topic of class is far from being a dispassionate one. There are bitterly contested views about what classes are, how to measure and analyse them, and their overall significance for society. And we are far from being neutral in these debates. We have been at the forefront of a group of British sociologists who have insisted over recent years that class remains fundamental to sociological analysis. We have also championed the thinking of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu as offering the most perceptive approach to unravelling the complexities of class today.”<sup>189</sup>

So, it is worth noting here that the answer to “who is interested in and talking about class?” is “people who have a specific interest in class and a particular agenda whether that be political or academic. Why do I raise this? Well, very simply because this reflects one of the key points we have seen coming through from our reading of JH Bavinck. We need to handle third party and generalised observations about our mission field with care. The best observations we can make are first-hand and personal.

Urban ministry will bring us into contact with those identified as “The Working Class.” Yet primarily, if our knowledge comes from books and academic studies, then it will not be coming from so-called working class people, but middle class observers.

This is Owen Jones, author of “Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Classes,” writing about himself:

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<sup>188</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 25. This reticence to talk about class, particularly among those regarded as working class created challenges for the Great British Class Survey. Savage observes that, “It turns out that those who are interested in doing a twenty-minute web survey are far from being typical of the population as a whole... there were big disparities in levels of participation that we actually observed at the local level.” Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 7. “A huge 4.1 per cent of all those replying to the GBCS were chief executive officers (CEOs), which turns out to be twenty times more than we would expect, given the total number of CEOs in the labour force. We also see a dramatic over-representation of business and related finance professionals, and also all kinds of scientists, researchers and professionals. Experts, of all kinds, were drawn in droves to the GBCS.” If middle class representation in the survey was high, participation from those regarded as belonging to lower classes was significantly lower. “Out of the 161,000 respondents, not a single cleaner or worker in the elementary (basic) services or plastics processing answered. There were also very few glaziers, fork-lift truck drivers or the like.” Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 11-12. This meant that the survey had to be supplemented with other forms of research. Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 11-12.

<sup>189</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 19.

“I was the only boy in the class to go to a sixth form college, let alone a university. Why? Because I was born into a middle class family – my mother was a lecturer at Salford University, my father an economic officer for Sheffield City Council.”<sup>190</sup>

Jones recognises the educational and career advantages he got from being middle class. I wonder if he recognises that this will also shape how he views the working class, their values, priorities and challenges?

In fact, any attempt to study people brings its challenges. We view them, their thoughts, words and feelings through our own hermeneutic and our very engagement in studying them affects and changes things. Reporting on the researcher’s approach to the Great British Class survey, Savage explains,

“Scientific experiments are normally expected to stand back from the research they are conducting in order to provide distanced and ‘objective’ results, for instance using randomized control tests when comparing which medical interventions are effective. However, in the case of the GBCS, we could not do this. Interests in class are themselves so highly loaded that if we try to stand back, then we miss the energies, intensities, but also the hostility and insecurity that are bound up with class. Indeed, this is a fundamental argument of our book.”<sup>191</sup>

Both Savage and Jones write with their own agendas too. For Jones, that might be more obvious as he is unashamedly engaged in left wing politics. Savage observes that “class” has played a significant role in the battles of modern politics,

“between socialists seeking to mobilize the working classes, and we can conservative politicians trying to appeal to the middle and upper classes.”<sup>192</sup>

He adds,

“We can readily identify the stakes and tensions this history produced. For some people, the working classes were a dangerous force of commoners who would drag down standards and lead to social and cultural decline if they were allowed too much influence. Yet for socialists and those active in the Labour movement, the working classes spearheaded a more egalitarian and caring ethos, which in its turn would bring about a more genuine nation, one able to move beyond the hypocrisies of upper-class gentlemanly culture. In terms of political belief, a lot rested on whether one sympathized with the working class.”<sup>193</sup>

There’s also the risk that people can assume that their own background, growing up on an estate, means that they are qualified to speak for the working class when in fact they have made decisions and had opportunities in life which mean they are far more remote from their origins than they think. David Davis, Conservative MP and cabinet minister, offers a corrective about this when he responds to Owen Jones’ question about whether senior MPs are out of touch with the working classes:

“Truthfully, it’s partly true of me too! You know, it’s a long time since I lived on a council estate, and the only thing you have that pulls you back to earth, really, is the constituency

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<sup>190</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 174.

<sup>191</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 6.

<sup>192</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 26.

<sup>193</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 29-30.

surgery, where you're dealing with people on a Friday night and Saturday morning with their problems."<sup>194</sup>

But that's not the only problem. There's also the danger that we attempt to witness in response to the picture provided in books. We may end up preaching to a stereotyped working class person and miss the real person. JH Bavinck reminds us that we cannot settle for knowing and witnessing to the religious system:

"In the first place we must try to see the person with whom we are dealing. This means that we must seek to see through a person's name, position, reasons and arguments, and try to reach his real life problems."<sup>195</sup>

Each person is an individual with their own views which may be different and even inconsistent with the overarching religious system. If it's true for religious conversations, then it is also true about politics and cultural contexts. Reading theory is no replacement for getting to know and listening to real people.

Despite its drawbacks, this type of wider reading is still worthwhile. I want to suggest that there are three reasons for this:

1. Unlike when Bavinck was helping people plan to go to far flung, remote places, our society is still much more interconnected. This means that we cannot think about how we reach one group or class within British society in isolation unless language, culture and religion have led to total isolation (which I think is likely to be extremely rare.) We are connected and so we can't just say "I only want to reach the working classes." Furthermore, to some extent, we are affected by how others portray, perceive and talk about us. We are labelled.
2. The different ways that the working class are viewed and portrayed tell us something about middle class culture and even idolatry too.
3. Writers who have an agenda are in effect bringing their own "gospel" offering what they believe to be a message of hope. Insofar as they are offering solutions as alternative good news to Jesus Christ, they are worshipping their own idols and presenting these idols to us for worship too. This includes Jones' Socialism but also Douglas Carswell's libertarian/anti-EU alternative too.

So whilst reading about class has its drawbacks, it also has its uses too. With that in mind, and alert to the potential weaknesses in the research of Savage and others, let's highlight a generalised understanding of class in the UK.

Classically, British society has been divided into three broad groupings: working class, middle class and upper class. There is some fluidity between working and middle classes, but the upper class tend to stand off as a distinct entity because the only way to join this class is through birth. Savage writes,

"In many nations, and certainly in Britain, there has been an enduring preoccupation with the centrality of the boundary between the middle and working classes over the past two centuries. The upper class tended to stand outside this fundamental tension: although highly visible, their aristocratic affiliations mark them as a group apart from the rest of society, defined by their privileges of birth, and with their own social rules and etiquette. It seems to

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<sup>194</sup> Owen Jones, *Chav*, 82.

<sup>195</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 125.

exist in and of itself, as a kind of special group. By contrast, the terms in which the middle and working classes understand themselves are more fluid and contested.”<sup>196</sup>

At a more technical and detailed level, the following groups in society have been identified by the National Statistics Socio-economic classification:

1. Higher Managerial, administrative and professional occupations
2. Lower Managerial, administrative and professional occupations
3. Intermediate occupations
4. Small employers and own accounts workers
5. Lower Supervisory and technical occupations
6. Semi-routine occupations
7. Routine Occupations
8. Never worked and long term unemployed.<sup>197</sup>

You will notice that this classification focuses exclusively on employment, something that Savage identifies as a weakness. In his opinion, class is determined by multiple factors arising from types of capital:

“Social classes arise from the concentration of three distinctive kinds of capital: economic capital (your wealth and income); cultural capital (your tastes, interests and activities), and social capital (your social networks, friendships and associations).”<sup>198</sup>

This led to those involved in producing the GBCS to suggest a redefinition of class. Savage explains, “we elaborated a new sociological model in April 2013 which proclaimed the existence of seven new classes”:<sup>199</sup>

1. Elite Class
2. Established Middle Class
3. Technical Middle Class
4. New Affluent Workers
5. Traditional Working Class
6. Emerging Service Workers
7. Precariat.<sup>200</sup>

Note that the labels are still heavily linked to work status. However, in the detail of his work, Savage looks more closely at the impact of the different types of capital on each class. Notice as well that the “working class” have been broken down into three different groups: Traditional Working Class, Emerging Service Workers and the Precariat, who experience a precarious life due to uncertain availability of work and the necessary capital to thrive. This is because,

“Class is fundamentally tied up with inequality. But not all economic inequalities are about class. Consider the case of someone who wins a million pounds on the National Lottery. They would be propelled, overnight, into the top percentile of the wealthiest people in the country. However, this does not, by itself, put that person into a different class. What allows inequalities to crystallize into classes is when advantages endure over time in a way which extends beyond any specific transaction. Thus, when our lottery winner invests her or his

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<sup>196</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 26.

<sup>197</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 40.

<sup>198</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 4.

<sup>199</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 6.

<sup>200</sup> See Fig 7.2. Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 229.

fortune in property, or buys a small business, we might then say that her or his economic resources are being accumulated and s/he is now implicated in different class relationships. Social classes, we contend, are fundamentally associated with the stored historical baggage and the accumulation of advantages over time.”<sup>201</sup>

So, if inequality is not just to do with economics, then what else is going on? Well, Savage explains,

“We have, in recent years, seen the proliferation of cultural markers of class which do not – at least on the face of it – appear to be directly linked to these occupational classes. We believe we need to seriously grapple with these to understand class today. We argue that a new kind of snobbery has emerged, one which does not overtly claim that some people or lifestyles are superior to others – since that would fly in the face of our sense of democratic equality, which we genuinely hold dear. Instead, the new snobbery is based on being ‘knowing’, and in displaying an awareness of the codes which are used to classify and differentiate between classes. It distinguishes those who are skilled in exercising judgement, in a knowing and sophisticated way, against those, whoever they may be, who are deemed unable to choose effectively. This is a kind of snobbery which proliferates in a market-based consumer society such as ours, where our display of taste is paramount and mundane. But this is not the kind of snobbery which is easily attributed to classes as bundles of occupations, such as registered in the NS-SEC schema.”<sup>202</sup>

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s work, he suggests that social and economic capital lead to class division because capital is inherited:

“We can immediately recognize the inheritance of property. We can readily imagine relatives gathering to listen to the lawyer reading out the will. The transmission of cultural capital, however, is opaque, and is necessarily masked in a language of meritocratic achievement and hard work. The importance of culture is therefore apparently denied in the very same moment that it operates.”<sup>203</sup>

However, despite the “language of meritocratic achievement,” Savage’s argument is that life is far from meritocratic. This can be seen most obviously in terms of economic capital with regard to finance because,

“Parental support, especially from the affluent, is highly significant for young people. Twenty-nine per cent of parents give financial support to their non-resident children, a figure which rises to 45 per cent for those parents aged between forty-five and fifty-four (the age period when their children are likely to be leaving home).”<sup>204</sup>

And in terms of property because,

“housing values depend not simply on the size and state of individual properties; they also reflect the market attractiveness of the neighbourhoods that surround them. Properties in more desirable areas will command higher prices than similar ones in less attractive places, even if there is little physical difference between the actual homes on offer. Therefore, property is inextricably linked to geography and the attractiveness of particular places to

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<sup>201</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 45-46.

<sup>202</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 44-45.

<sup>203</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 49-50.

<sup>204</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 75.

live. A home is not just somewhere to lay your head; for the advantaged, it can also be a strategic investment choice.”<sup>205</sup>

However, the other types of capital play their part. Cultural capital for example is distinguished between high culture and low culture. High Culture is defined by its support by from the state, recognition by those regarded as cultural critics and promotion through the education system.<sup>206</sup> Cultural capital confers benefit because, as Savage explains,

[Bourdieu] “claims that certain kinds of culture have the prospect of generating social advantage and are hence forms of ‘capital’. But how does this happen? Bourdieu argued that the appreciation of hallowed forms of music (such as classical music), or the visual arts, depends on valuing their abstract qualities – not seeking immediate indulgence or pleasure, but instead being able to appreciate them ‘at a distance’, more cerebrally, in a way which permits their application across different contexts. Thus, when roaming in the British Museum, there are no games machines or gimmicks, but instead only ‘great’ artistic and archaeological exhibits that are seen to have universal status. And by learning to appreciate culture in this abstract way, certain other advantages can be accumulated. It gives access to what Bourdieu calls ‘legitimate culture’, which is respectable and socially approved, being consecrated in public forums such as museums, galleries and in the educational system... It follows that those steeped in this culture are better placed to understand their school curriculum and are trained in the skills of abstraction, which might help them to get better qualifications which can also be a platform for more successful careers. This might explain, for instance, why it is those with ‘analytical skills’ whose earnings seem to have increased the most in recent years.”<sup>207</sup>

Savage also recognises that culture has evolved so that younger people from across the class spectrum may engage in popular culture. He refers to this as “emerging culture” but observes that this emerging culture is not a general enjoyment of popular culture but often involves showing discernment – a preference for less well known/mainstream artists.<sup>208</sup>

“Emerging cultural capital is therefore not about liking popular culture per se, but rather demonstrating one’s skill in manoeuvring between the choices on the menu.”<sup>209</sup>

Similarly, class, according to Savage, reflects inequalities in Social Capital. This is demonstrated by educational inequality. There is an inequality about the distribution of graduates across the classes as the following figures demonstrate:

- 55% - Elite Class
- 40% - Established Middle Class
- 25% - Technical Middle Class
- 10% - New Affluent Workers
- 10% - Traditional Working Class

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<sup>205</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 78.

<sup>206</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 95.

<sup>207</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 97.

<sup>208</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 115.

<sup>209</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 115.

20% - Emerging Service Workers

>5% - Precariat<sup>210</sup>

Again, this reflects a society that is far from meritocratic: even achieving higher education is no guarantee of class progress.

“We are well aware of how the rich and powerful can ‘look after their own’. For example, one of our respondents told us how her son was the first in his family to attend university. He studied law and looked for law jobs after he graduated. His girlfriend also studied law, took a first-class degree and was second-ranked in her entire year. The mother thought that since her son had worked two jobs all the way through university, potential employers would recognize him as a good worker. But after they graduated, neither of them could find a job in law. They reported that one person from their class went on to further education in order to become a solicitor, but this mother told us that her son had said, ‘The only way you’d get in a law job is if you’d got a parent or family within a solicitors’ who would take you on. [...] Otherwise, you’ve no chance.’ The mother was understandably very unhappy about this and saw her son’s university education as nearly a total waste.”<sup>211</sup>

These observations are important for two reasons. First of all, urban mission will often mean working with those categorised as belonging to the bottom 3 class groups in Savage’s system. In Paul’s words, we can say of those who come to faith in urban contexts,

“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”<sup>212</sup>

This should warn us against the temptation to judge people by worldly standards and measure their status against human perceptions of success.

Secondly, it means that the solutions offered by those engaging with “working class” communities are likely to focus on the problem of inequality. One important question for us is to what extent the problem of “inequality” and the desire for “equality” reflect felt needs, dreams and desires which find true fulfilment in Christ and to what extent they reflect false, idolatrous solutions that need to be subverted by the Gospel. This is something we will reflect on later.

#### **6.4. Estate Life**

I now want to turn to one final and specific example of urban and particularly working-class identity: Council Estate life. Council Estates consist of houses that were originally built and let by local authorities in order to provide affordable social housing.

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<sup>210</sup> Percentage of graduates per class. See Fig 7.2. Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 229.

<sup>211</sup> Savage, *Social Class in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, 131.

<sup>212</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 (ESV).

From 1919-1980, government policy focused on creating and sustaining such estates as a means to rescue people from slum life, to reduce or even eliminate poverty and to encourage community cohesion.<sup>213</sup>

“It is not enough merely to cover the ground with streets and houses. The site should be considered as the future location of a community mostly engaged in industrial pursuits having many needs in addition to that of house room.”<sup>214</sup>

Was the policy successful? Well, “the official expectation was that estates would become permanent and stable communities with community associations and ideally an estate hall or centre.”<sup>215</sup> This was attempted by designing estates around green spaces in the hope that community would naturally form.<sup>216</sup>

“A major dilemma was at what stage, and through whose efforts, a hall or centre should be built. Should it be there at the start so that the absence of premises did not impede the emergence of community life? In that case tenants might take it for granted and not be duly appreciative. Or should it depend upon their own efforts, so affording a valuable lesson in practical democracy?”<sup>217</sup>

My own observation both of the estate context where I now live and the estates around the part of Bradford where I grew up and went to school is that they often are places that seem to have hard borders (you know where the estate starts and finishes) but no real centre. Even though community centres and shopping precincts exist, there is often a lack of a sense of community that unites all the residents on the estate. Some mini communities may exist such as gangs of teenagers or the micro community between one or two neighbours, especially on cul-de-sacs. Ravetz’s conclusion is that the experiment failed:

“As an attempt by one class to provide an improved environment and culture for another class, council housing at best accommodated existing working-class culture: it did not renew it.”<sup>218</sup>

The inference is that it failed because it was essentially paternalistic in nature. It was an experiment by the upper and middle classes on a passive working class. As Hanley observes,

“The first council houses were built in a spirit of something-has-to-be-done paternalism, reflecting the values that defined the Victorian era.”<sup>219</sup>

Hanley also believes that Council Estates failed because, in her opinion, they failed to deal with inequality:

“families who moved from the cities onto the new estates... could place themselves in a new class spectrum according to the poshness of the part of the estate they found themselves seconded to.”<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>213</sup> Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 8.

<sup>214</sup> Tudor Walters Report, 1918. Cited in Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 137. “Council housing, historically had two goals: the cure of poverty and the replacement of a working-class culture deemed undesirable by a new and ideal one.” Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 172.

<sup>215</sup> Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 138.

<sup>216</sup> Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 138.

<sup>217</sup> Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 138.

<sup>218</sup> Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 173.

<sup>219</sup> Lynsey Hanley, *Estates*, 18.

<sup>220</sup> Linsey Hanley, *Estates*, 13.

This suggested inequality of status appears to arise out of an inequality of provision. Whilst some estates and some parts of estates were regarded as desirable with well-built, well-kept homes and large, well-kept gardens, other parts of estates were seen as undesirable with poor condition housing, high density, high rise apartment blocks which were often cheaply (and, as we discovered with the Grenfell Tower fire, unsafely) built and maintained.

Hanley sees a link between the environment and the class system, commenting that “much of the stubborn rigidity of the British class system is down to the fact that class is built into the physical landscape of the country.”<sup>221</sup> Reflecting on her own upbringing on an estate, she observes,

“It’s not something you think about when you’re growing up. *Wow, I’m alienated. My school is suffering from its single class intake. What this estate needs is a public transport infrastructure.* It’s more a sense you have. A sense that someone who lives in a proper house in a proper town, sat on the floor of an office one day with a box of fancy Lego bricks and laid out, with mathematical precision, a way of housing as many people as possible in as small a space as could be got away with. And in so doing forgot that real people aren’t inanimate yellow shapes with permanent smiles on their plastic bodies. That real people might get lost in such a place.”<sup>222</sup>

The result is that economic, social and cultural capital conspire with the environment to the disadvantage of council estate inhabitants. Often denigrated and looked down upon, they are demonised by the media and mocked by the wider population as “chavs.” As Owen Jones says,

“The term ‘chav’ now encompasses any negative traits associated with working-class people – violence, laziness, teenage pregnancies, racism, drunkenness and the rest.”<sup>223</sup>

This leads Hanley to ask,

“I wonder if the stigma of coming from a council estate is ever turned to an advantage and whether that inherent sense of inferiority ever becomes a source of pride.”<sup>224</sup>

There have been substantial changes to estate life since the 1980s. One of the biggest social and economic changes that Margaret Thatcher brought in was the right to buy, leading to the selling off of many council houses to their tenants. Some remained in their homes, whilst others saw an opportunity to profit and to climb the social ladder by selling on and moving off the estate. Today, many estates will include a mix of owner-occupied houses and tenant occupied, whether rented through Local Authorities, private landlords or social housing associations.<sup>225</sup>

In Jones’ view, the right to buy scheme either created or at least exacerbated division and inequality because it,

“drove a wedge through working class Britain, creating a divide between homeowners and council tenants. Right-to-buy meant that the best housing stock was sold off; and it was the

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<sup>221</sup> Lynsey Hanley, *Estates*, 18.

<sup>222</sup> Lynsey Hanley, *Estates*, 5.

<sup>223</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 8.

<sup>224</sup> Lynsey Hanley, *Estates*, 5.

<sup>225</sup> On our cul-de-sac, there is approximately a 50-50 split between owner occupied and rented. The ratios differ across the estate.

relatively better off council tenants who were becoming homeowners. Those who remained council tenants tended to be poorer and in the worst homes.”<sup>226</sup>

For Hanley, the issue is to do with choice and who has choice:

“The point is that most people now have a surfeit of choice in their lives at the same time as a large minority have none. That large minority tends to live on council estates whether in cities or outside of them. The 50 percent of poor people (that is whose incomes are less than 60 percent of the median average) who are homeowners also tend to live on council estates as beneficiaries of the right-to-buy-policy – proof, if any were needed that a property owning democracy doesn’t necessarily mean an equal one. They too have little choice where they live due to the fact that council housing – with the exception of one or two listed buildings in London – is never as desirable, and therefore can never be worth as much as private.”<sup>227</sup>

As with the wider working class described by writers like Savage, there is a sense that those on estates are the victims of inequality. Lacking power and choice, they are in effect passive as those in power experiment with their lives.

Once again, it is important to remember that the story presented here is third hand, generalised and comes from those with their own agenda and their own solutions or “gospel” to offer. These accounts are helpful as we seek to get our bearings, but no replacement for choosing to live life on the estate and getting to know your neighbours with their individual needs, concerns, hopes, dreams and desires. Indeed, whilst we are quick to talk about the problems on estates including poor housing, unemployment, gangs, crime, drugs etc. we might also be encouraged by some to pay attention to the positives as well. Whilst the top-down approach may not have created unified communities artificially, those micro-communities are real. Reflecting on the Shannon Matthews case, where a mother in Dewsbury arranged for her own daughter’s apparent kidnapping, Owen Jones comments that the newspapers presented an image of estate life that was entirely negative, an image drawn from the TV programme “Shameless” of a feckless, criminal, underclass.<sup>228</sup> However,

“Journalists had to be more than a little selective to create this caricature. They didn’t mention the fact that when the media became bored with some scruffy working-class girl vanishing ‘up north’, the local community had compensated by coming together to find her. Scores of volunteers had tramped door to door with leaflets every night of her disappearance, often in pouring rain. They had booked coaches to take teams of people as far afield as Birmingham to hand out notices, while multi-lingual leaflets had been produced to cater for the area’s large Muslim population.”<sup>229</sup>

He concludes,

“This sense of a tightly knit working-class community, with limited resources, united behind a common cause, never became part of the Shannon Matthews story.”<sup>230</sup>

One of our strong memories of moving onto our estate was a knock on the door one snowy evening. A neighbour kept an eye out and spotted that our car wasn’t there. Sarah had parked a street away

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<sup>226</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 62.

<sup>227</sup> Linsey Hanley, *Estates*, 4.

<sup>228</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 20.

<sup>229</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 20-21.

<sup>230</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 21.

due to the icy, snowy conditions. It reminded me a little of the famous quote from the Falklands War about the Harrier Jets: “I can’t tell you how many took part in the attack, but I counted them all out and I counted them all back in again.” This is a place where people watch out for each other.

As we consider urban mission on estates, we may want to search out examples of community spirit and of art and culture whether reflected in graffiti, R&B music or sport and of street wisdom. As we look to discover the identity of the people we seek to minister to, we will start by seeing that they are humans, made in God’s image.

### **6.5. Is there something else going on?**

As I reflect upon identity, I’m still not quite comfortable with the way that a lot of attention relating to urban mission has been placed on class. I’ve mentioned above the challenges involved in identifying class and particularly the working class and the middle class.

Then I read a blog post by a pastor in Cleckheaton, one of the typical West Yorkshire industrial, or post-industrial towns. Graham Thompson writes,

“I grew up, and have lived all my life, in industrial (and then post-industrial) West Yorkshire. And my formative years were during the 1980s and 90s (when industry was becoming increasingly post-). And in those days round here, it was us against the world. We were Yorkshire, we were working class (even when we weren’t), and we were ‘oppressed’ by middle class southerners. Whatever the truth was, that situation, this place, was crucial to the identity of so many Yorkshire people of my generation.”<sup>231</sup>

I think that his comment “We were Yorkshire” hits the nail on the head. Indeed, it would be even more localised than that. My experience growing up was that “we were Bradford” and more local than that, we identified with our particular part of South Bradford, the specific network of council and private estates. There were shared connections and tribal links through schools, the football team (Rugby League didn’t capture the imagination or loyalties in quite the same way during the 80s and early 90s). I understand going back historically there would have been connections with the mill or factory.

What this means is that, to challenge and modify Graham a little, I don’t think the “working class” thing mattered too much. It was only in fact when I got to university and met obviously posh, privately educated people with fake Cockney accents trying to sell me the Socialist Worker newspaper that I began to hear about a so-called ‘class war’. Indeed, whisper it gently, but unlike South Yorkshire with the miners or Liverpool with its distinctive politics, there wasn’t even a big Labour-Tory thing. Bradford Council tended to switch between the two and South Bradford was a tight marginal.

Graham is right: the real “us and them” divide was with the posh outsiders. Poshness was about geography: the South and Harrogate. It was also about giving yourself airs and graces, thinking you were better than everyone else. But if you kept your accent and your feet on the ground, you could own a supermarket chain, make a million, buy the football club and still be “one of us.” Rather than becoming middle class, you were the “local boy done well.”

Identity in urban Britain is often about where we are from and who we are connected to. It’s geographical. This also means that, over time, people from other ethnic backgrounds can grow to share that same identity. It also reflects something else often missed. This struck me a few years ago

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<sup>231</sup> <http://mardytomidlin.org/theres-nowt-as-queer-as-yorkshire-folk/> accessed 02/08/2019.

as I sat on the rooftop of a hospital in Menouf, Egypt. All around me were the signs of urbanisation as high rise blocks went up quickly. Yet walking through the streets were men and women herding animals and leading donkeys. I had seen similar scenes in Shenzhen, South China in my 20s. You could take people out of the country, but you could not take the country out of them! Surrounded by urbanisation were people clinging on to their rural identity.

That perhaps explains the connections to mill, school, football team, specific estate. In the end, cities are just conglomerations of villages and we still seek our identity in small communities.

## 7 Establishing Points of Contact

At this stage, we have a generalised understanding of the types of people we are likely to encounter in urban Britain today. However, searching out requires us to drill down a further level. One of our aims is to establish points of contact with people. This is where we begin to talk more about hopes and fears, dreams and desires.

Contact is possible because of a number of reasons. First, there is the sense that people everywhere fall back on the same big questions: “Who am I?” “What is my purpose in life?” “Where did I come from? What are the origins of the world around me?” “Is there more than this? Does God exist and who is he?” and “What happens when I die?”<sup>232</sup>

Secondly, we saw early on that people are religious. This means, as we saw previously, that they are conflicted at heart; they are both looking to run away from God and to seek after him.<sup>233</sup> Dan Strange believes that this religiosity is a factor of being human and made in God’s image. He writes,

“All human beings are created in the imago Dei and ‘sons of God’ are created as ‘religious’ beings, revealing God, representing him and built for relationship with each other and the rest of creation.”<sup>234</sup>

Not only that, but our inherent religious nature is not merely generic but specific and focused on our relationship to the true and living God:

“This religious nature... is not merely the capacity we have for relating to, worshipping, obeying or disobeying something or someone we consider ultimate, what we might call a generic religiosity, but is rather a particular religiosity: our relationship, worship and obedience or disobedience to the self-contained ontological Trinity, the living God of the Bible.”<sup>235</sup>

This is perhaps best articulated by two Bible texts. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says,

“He has made everything beautiful in its time. Also, he has put eternity into man's heart, yet so that he cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.”

In Acts 14:16-17 Paul says,

“In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”

Together, these texts offer both encouragement and challenge. There is the encouragement that God has not left us alone and that there is an awareness of “something more” in each one of us. On the other hand, the challenge remains that this longing and the provision of “General Revelation” are not enough to enable us to discover God. We need God to speak to us and reveal himself to us.

This brings us to a third point: that we have not been left devoid of Special Revelation even prior to the receipt of Scripture. Dan Strange, following Jonathan Edwards, argues strongly in “For their Rock

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<sup>232</sup> See Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 131.

<sup>233</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 123.

<sup>234</sup> Strange, *For their Rock is not as our Rock*, 71.

<sup>235</sup> Strange, *For their Rock is not as our Rock*, 71.

is not as our Rock” for something called “Priscae Theologia” or “Original Revelation.”<sup>236</sup> By this, he means,

“a remnantal revelation of God disseminated and preserved universally in humanity but distorted and degenerated over time.”<sup>237</sup>

This argument relies on the understanding that our common ancestors, Adam and Noah, would have passed on revelation even if oral tradition meant that those who did not have access to either written Scripture or the illumination of the Holy Spirit will have received a distorted and fragmented story. Christians, Muslims and Jews are one stage further down the line in sharing common spiritual heritage from Abraham. Furthermore, there are shared written Scriptures with both Jews and Christians recognising the Torah, Prophets and Writings (Old Testament) as God’s Word. Muslims may theoretically recognise the existence of the Christian scriptures, but argue that what we have are distorted or false copies. However, even still it is possible to trace a relationship between the Koran and Judaeo-Christian teachings.

It is worth noting that for many white British people, there is a similar relationship to Revelation with that experienced by those of other faiths. Many of the people we have contact with will not have had direct access to Bible study. However, they have inherited fragments of revelation in a number of ways. First of all, there will be those who attended Sunday School and religious assemblies at schools. Secondly, some will have picked up snatches of Scripture at weddings, funerals and Christmas carol services. Thirdly, many will have been exposed to Biblical stories retold for cinema. In recent years, films have portrayed the life of Moses, the account of Noah’s Flood and the crucifixion of Jesus. Fourthly, Scripture has influenced our culture through stories reflecting on or allegorising the Gospel such as “The Chronicles of Narnia” and “The Lord of Rings.” At another level, words and phrases prominent in our language owe much to both William Shakespeare and the King James Bible. This means that, often without realising it, people have been exposed to these fragments of revealed truth. Often revelation is mixed up with and distorted by other cultural norms.

All of this means that there will be plenty of points of contact with the people we desire to share the Gospel with. In the rest of this chapter, I will look at three examples:

- People from a Muslim background – offering a perspective on engagement with those from a different faith.
- Immigrants and asylum seekers
- Council Estate residents.

### **7.1 People from a Muslim Background**

Islam immediately appears to offer a number of contact points with Christianity. First of all, Islam answers the question, “Is there more than this?” similarly by affirming that there is one creator God who reveals himself in written Scripture brought to us by his chosen prophets. Muslims believe that they are made by this God to worship him. Islam expects a future judgement day when we will appear before him to give an account for our lives. At first appearance, Muslims and Christians appear to be offering similar answers to questions such as “Who am I?” “Where do I come from?” and “What happens when we die?” This seems to provide a basis for Christian and Muslim dialogue.

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<sup>236</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1992), 108-114.

<sup>237</sup> Strange, ‘For their rock is not as our rock’, 108.

Alert readers will realise that behind these apparent similarities are sharp differences that lead to fierce dispute. The obvious examples are,

- That Christians believe that the one God is a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, whereas Muslims see this as tritheism and idolatrous.
- That Christians believe that Scripture is God-breathed but give a greater role to the inspired human authors, whereas Islam treats the Quran as dictated to Mohammed by Allah. Strictly speaking, the Quran cannot be translated from Arabic and Muslims believe that the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures have been altered by wilful corruption and the accident of copying and translation errors.
- That strictly speaking, Islam is about submission to Allah so that worship is a form of slavery to a divine master rather than a loving relationship with Father God.
- That Christians believe that they can face judgement day with assurance because salvation is based on God's grace to us in Christ, whereas Muslims are dependent upon Allah's arbitrary mercy.

Later, we will see how these discrepancies, rather than being an obstacle to Gospel witness, in fact form the very basis for a Gospel conversation as they provide the examples of distortions and irritations which show that Islam cannot fulfil the Muslim's dreams and desires. Furthermore, we can see that Islam's attempts to interact with and challenge Christianity demonstrate a further awareness of Christian revelation whilst failing to fully understand it. For example, whilst Islam rejects the true deity of Jesus, it recognises that we must somehow account for the Virgin birth. To do so, it takes us to Adam as the first human who had neither father nor mother. Unwittingly, the Muslim who quotes this text is stumbling upon important revelation provided for us in Romans 5 that Christ is the second Adam. Islam compares Jesus to Adam, but fails to understand the necessity of the Virgin Birth because it doesn't recognise Jesus as the second, last and greater Adam.

So, our first and obvious "points of contact" are overtly theological. However, there are other ways in which we can spot these opportunities for dialogue which draw more on social and cultural desires. I would argue that, because God is Lord over every aspect of life, these contact points are also theological and will require Gospel answers. To explain what I mean by this, I want to refer you to a book written by Peter G Riddell in the fallout from 9/11. "Christians and Muslims" is a look at how we can engage with Muslims in the shadow of international terrorism as well as the intense debate about immigration and integration.<sup>238</sup>

Riddell argues that British Muslims are seeking to answer the important question "What does it mean to live in modern Britain?" First of all, he observes a typology that mirrors the Christian typology of liberalism, traditionalism and evangelicalism.<sup>239</sup> He identifies Muslim Modernizers, Muslim Traditionalists and Islamists.<sup>240</sup>

"Muslim modernizers are concerned with defining faith within a contemporary world context. They follow a method of interpreting the Islamic texts to fit the modern context."<sup>241</sup>

This grouping includes secularized and cultural Muslims.<sup>242</sup> Riddell compares this with liberal Christianity's attempts to reconcile faith with modernism.

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<sup>238</sup> Peter G Riddell, *Christians and Muslims: Pressures and Potential in a post-9/11 world* (Leicester: IVP, 2004).

<sup>239</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 18.

<sup>240</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.

<sup>241</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.

<sup>242</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.

“Muslim traditionalists emphasize the primacy of the scholarly elite, with congregations trained to acknowledge the wisdom of accumulated traditional authority rather than to engage dynamically with the primary sources themselves. In Muslim minority communities in western countries, Muslim traditionalists tend to be the immigrant generation.”<sup>243</sup>

This may on one level be compared with Christian Traditionalism which looks to the passed on teaching of The Church.

“Islamists use Islamic Scripture as the filter through which all discussion passes. They dream of a past ‘golden age’ when Prophet Muhammed was establishing his community in Medina and when God’s law, the shari’a, held sway. Many Muslim young people born in the West of immigrant parents opt for the Islamist paradigm, because of a sense of alienation from the majority culture.”<sup>244</sup>

Tentatively, Riddell compares this with Evangelicalism in terms of Scriptural interpretation, although he recognises that “one must be wary of drawing facile comparisons.”<sup>245</sup> Indeed, some may observe that Islamism is, if anything, closer to Christian Fundamentalism, especially to Theonomism. Furthermore, the model is complicated by the need to overlay the different streams of Islamic thought onto it, including Shi’as, Sunnis, and Sufis as well as further subsets and offshoots. However, what the model does show is that a point of contact between Muslims and Christians is the desire to answer the question, “How do we live in the now and the not yet?” Christians and Muslims recognise that the world we live in is not as it should be and Muslims may share with Christians a sense of being people in exile.

This means that Muslims have attempted to answer the question, “How do we engage with modern Britain?” in categories we may recognise: participation or separation. Riddell argues that, “The majority of Muslims in Britain are committed to participating in British society as an integral element in it. They see Britain as their home and their future.”<sup>246</sup>

This majority includes those who want to “blend in and assimilate” with British Culture.<sup>247</sup> There are risks with this approach. Riddell observes that, “This is the group whose Muslim identity may weaken with succeeding generations through intermarriage, secularist influences and conversion to another religion or no religion.”<sup>248</sup>

Participations also include those who want to “participate and influence society.”<sup>249</sup> This group recognises that the creation of a fully Islamic society is unrealistic but “is based on the notion that Muslims in Britain should participate fully in the majority society but should strengthen their Muslim identity and try to impart Muslim values and views in the process.”<sup>250</sup>

On the other hand, the alternative option is separation. This category includes those who are “separating within Britain” and those “preparing to leave Britain to live in Muslim majority

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<sup>243</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.

<sup>244</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.

<sup>245</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.

<sup>246</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 61.

<sup>247</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 61.

<sup>248</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 62.

<sup>249</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 62.

<sup>250</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 62.

countries.”<sup>251</sup> The former includes those who are campaigning for the right to follow shari’a law in the UK.<sup>252</sup>

Both approaches are not without their problems. Separatists who remain in the UK must still acknowledge the existence of a dominant and powerful secular society which demands submission and competes with Allah, whilst those seeking to leave the UK will be faced with the imperfections and inconsistencies found in many supposedly Islamic countries. Meanwhile, those who participate will be faced with the challenge of compromise with a culture and worldview which is in opposition to its beliefs.

Christians will find opportunities to talk about how the Bible offers better answers to such dilemmas.

## 7.2 Immigrants and Asylum Seekers

In this section, I want to focus specifically on people who are new to country or are waiting for an immigration decision. During my time at Bearwood Chapel, I’ve had significant contact with people seeking leave to remain in the UK. This includes people who specifically came here to seek work and a better way of life: economic migrants if you like. For several years, we’ve had a lot of contact with South Americans who came to the UK from Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia, usually via Spain. It is worth pointing out two things here. First of all, that “a better life” is broader and deeper than simple economic benefit. Indeed, I have spoken to people who explain that the work they take on pays less well than what they could get in other countries, but they believe that life will be better here for their families through a better standard of education, better living conditions, distance from gang cultures etc.

Then there are those seeking leave to remain for humanitarian reasons. We tend to put these under the umbrella category of asylum seekers, but actually there is a range of reasons why people might flee one country to seek refuge here, not just due to persecution from the State.

Some asylum seekers are here because of religious persecution. They have become Christians and this will mean prison, torture and potential death back home. Others are here because they belonged to banned political movements. Then there are those who are on the run from gang violence or abuse from within the family or clan. When they sought justice back home, they found that they could not obtain it because the police and judiciary were either corrupt or powerless.

When someone is seeking asylum, the Home Office encourages them to apply as soon as possible. They are then invited for a screening interview with an immigration officer followed by a detailed interview with a case worker.<sup>253</sup> The Home Office aims to make a decision within 6 months.<sup>254</sup> However, many asylum claims are classified as “non-straightforward” and excluded from the 6 month target, meaning they can take 12 months and even longer.<sup>255</sup> An asylum seeker is not normally allowed to take paid work whilst they are waiting for a decision, meaning that they are dependent on a small living allowance plus accommodation provided by the Home Office. It is possible to appeal a decision and to submit fresh claims with new evidence, meaning that people

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<sup>251</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 62.

<sup>252</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 62.

<sup>253</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/claim-asylum> accessed 29/08/2018.

<sup>254</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/claim-asylum> accessed 29/08/2018.

<sup>255</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/nov/28/half-of-asylum-claims-classed-as-non-straightforward-face-long-delays> accessed 29/08/2019

can find themselves in the process for several years; life effectively on hold. During that time, they have to report regularly to the Home Office.

It is often hard for someone to tell their story. They have learnt that they will not be believed; they are sometimes encouraged to alter their story to meet perceived expectations and “short-cuts” around the system. I’ve heard people share how they’ve been encouraged to “just go and get pregnant” and that way they will be able to stay. Often, they come from shame cultures and their stories carry not just hurt but, because of abuse, they feel unclean and dehumanised. They expect to be shamed again. Very often, you get the sense that they are still running, still hiding.

So, what is it that people are looking for? What are their hopes, dreams and desires? I would suggest that they are looking for,

- A home; a place to belong; welcome and acceptance.
- Safety; freedom from fear; the sense that they no longer have to run and hide.
- Freedom to get on with their lives.
- Hope for the future.

Quickly, they learn that the UK immigration system does not offer those things. They experience detention, interrogation, bureaucracy. They find themselves in a culture where they are viewed with suspicion: the tabloid media screams out headlines about “bogus asylum seekers” and “scroungers.” They face racial abuse from their neighbours.

Here again is an opportunity to find points of contact with people and to share with them what it means to be welcome, to find a home and to discover true freedom and real hope.

### 7.3 Council Estate Residents

In “Unreached,” Tim Chester lists nine factors common to working class people generally and estate people specifically. These are:

1. “Anti-authoritarianism.”<sup>256</sup> “Their experience of the State is likely to be either that of threat or an unwieldy bureaucracy.”<sup>257</sup>
2. “Entitlement mentality.”<sup>258</sup> “The benefit system has created many people who are used to others providing for them.”<sup>259</sup>
3. “Reputation” – where do you sit in the social hierarchy?<sup>260</sup>
4. “The struggle”<sup>261</sup> “It’s not just that life is hard, but the fact of struggling forms part of their identity.”<sup>262</sup>
5. “Victim mentality”<sup>263</sup> People often see themselves as victims, with little power over their lives. Because they feel powerless, they may resist the system by being passive-aggressive rather than aggressive in a combative way.”<sup>264</sup>
6. “Limited aspirations.”<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 46.

<sup>257</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 46. -

<sup>258</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 47.

<sup>259</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 47.

<sup>260</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 47.

<sup>261</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 47.

<sup>262</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 47.

<sup>263</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 48.

<sup>264</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 48.

<sup>265</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 48.

7. “Relational assets:” community and friendship matter.<sup>266</sup>
8. “Non-abstract, concrete thinking.”<sup>267</sup>
9. “Non-diarized relational lifestyles.”<sup>268</sup> “Your allegiance is to the people you are with, not to the clock” says Mez McConnell. ‘If you meet someone, go with the flow. Being missional cannot be fitted into a diary slot.’<sup>269</sup>

We have already begun to see the challenges involved with an experience of life where you are regarded as at the bottom of the pile, treated as passive recipients, mocked and reviled by society around you.

Duncan Forbes, a pastor who planted a church on an estate in Southwest London, takes our understanding of estate life deeper still by offering us an outline council estate understanding of God:

“Here is a council-estate view of God, albeit a generalization:

God does exist, but he’s not in control of everything. God has dealt me a set of cards, and now it’s my job to do the best I can with them. I’m going to take care of number one and my family, because no-one else is going to care for me. Life is a big struggle. We’re trying to take care of ourselves but this is tough. We commit sins along the way. We need to protect ourselves, so we have a vicious dog or carry a knife. We feel like victims. We spend our lives being aggressive towards injustice. ‘Are you going to take that?’ we ask each other. It sometimes leads to vigilante attacks, because no-one else is going to establish justice. So we set ourselves up as God. We want to be the person in control. We want to be the provider, the judge, the avenger, the enforcer.”<sup>270</sup>

You will notice that a theology – a belief system – is being offered here. It includes a picture of what God is like, who we are and where we are from, what salvation is and a version of future hope. Later on, we will return to this in order to see how that theology presents a distortion of the truth and encourages us to believe lies about God, Creation, Humanity and New Creation. However, at this stage, I want to pick up again on the points of contact that exist.

First of all, Duncan argues that people on estates often believe that God exists. They may have an inaccurate view of who God is, but they are people who were created to worship. Secondly, they desire safety and security, often in the face of violence and crime. Thirdly, they long for justice. This justice includes both the response to those who carry out criminal attacks such as muggings and assaults, but also justice in the face of a system that often seems stacked against them. Justice for the council estate resident is likely to include justice in response to those who hold wealth and power for themselves. Justice includes a heart cry against the people who thought it was okay to take short cuts when building and maintaining high rise flats, leading to the Grenfell tragedy. Justice includes a sense that you belong to a class who are expected to wait in line whilst others can jump the queue, a society where you are given what you are given whilst others have the luxury of choice is unfair. Fourthly, they are looking to be provided for and to provide.

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<sup>266</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 49.

<sup>267</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 50.

<sup>268</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 50.

<sup>269</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 51.

<sup>270</sup> Chester, *Unreached*, 90.

## 7.4 Conclusion

At this point, we realise that there are distinctions between the contexts, experiences and hopes of the different people we meet in our inner cities and on our estates. However, we have also begun to discover some common themes. These include a desire for home, acceptance, belonging, a search for identity, a yearning to find future hope and a belief that there is more to life than the here and now.

We also begin to see some common threads because the reason why people in urban Britain have failed to find fulfilment for their longings is because they have been looking in the wrong places.

“For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”<sup>271</sup>

They have been looking in the wrong places because they have chosen to believe lies about God, his creation, us and the promised new creation. We will find out more about this in Part 3: Showing Up.

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<sup>271</sup> Jeremiah 2:13.

# Hope for the City Part 3

## Showing Up

## 8 Showing Up: Alternative Hope

In this chapter, we start to think more about idolatry and the alternative (false) hopes that people living in urban neighbourhoods are offered. Showing up is the stage where we start to think about why idolatry offers false hope by showing up its failings and flaws. Idolatry offers false hope because whilst for a time it might appear to meet felt needs, it does not meet a person's real need. Indeed, they are likely to discover that it does not meet their felt needs either.

I have classified the types of alternative hope as follows:

- Socio-economic hope
- Political hope
- Religious Hope

### 8.1 Socio-economic hope

When we first moved to the West Midlands, we lived on a council estate. Our house was built in the 1930s between the wars. The aim of these estates was to lift people out of deprivation. They were for people living in inner city slums: back to back houses with poor sanitation. Our estate isn't bad. We live in a fairly quiet area, about 50% of the houses are owner occupied and the other half rented via the Council's housing association. Moving to our estate in the 1930s and onwards into the 50s and 60s would have been seen as an opportunity to escape the slums to well built houses with large gardens.

Yet, estates today have a terrible reputation. I grew up in South Bradford where much of that part of the city was a large sprawling network of council estates, all of which had a bad reputation for crime and poverty. Even back in the 1980s, many parts of the larger estates were considered both undesirable and unsafe. Lynsey Hanley writes of her own experience growing up on an estate:

*"It's not something you think about when you're growing up. Wow, I'm alienated. My school is suffering from its single class intake. What this estate needs is a public transport infrastructure. It's more a sense you have. A sense that someone who lives in a proper house in a proper town, sat on the floor of an office one day with a box of fancy Lego bricks and laid out, with mathematical precision, a way of housing as many people as possible in as small a space as could be got away with. And in so doing forgot that real people aren't inanimate yellow shapes with permanent smiles on their plastic bodies. That real people might get lost in such a place."*<sup>272</sup>

Remember, it wasn't meant to be like this. An early report stating the purposes of building new estates says,

*"It is not enough merely to cover the ground with streets and houses. The site should be considered as the future location of a community mostly engaged in industrial pursuits having many needs in addition to that of house room."*<sup>273</sup>

Did you see that? The aim was to build communities. In other words, to offer the very hope denied to the dispossessed majorities in cities: community, culture, safety. Ravetz explains that,

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<sup>272</sup> Linsey Hanley, *Estates*, 5.

<sup>273</sup> Tudor Walters Report, 1918. Cited in Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 137.

“Council housing, historically had two goals: the cure of poverty and the replacement of a working-class culture deemed undesirable by a new and ideal one.”<sup>274</sup>

Now, we may observe something in the second part of that objective which is deeply disturbing and negative. Even in the context of benign desires to improve life, we see prejudice and suspicion. Estates are the product of class and elitism, a belief that there is a ruling group in society that knows what is best for everyone else. Estates are rooted in the belief that there is something dangerous and undesirable about working class culture. As Hanley comments,

“The first council houses were built in a spirit of something-has-to-be-done paternalism, reflecting the values that defined the Victorian era.”<sup>275</sup>

Yet, mixed in with prejudice was that genuine desire to offer a better hope. This can be seen in Labour politician Aneurin Bevan’s hope for post-war estates that,

“If we are to enable citizens to lead a full life, if they are each to be aware of the problems of their neighbours, then they should all be drawn from different sectors of the community. We should try to introduce what was always the lovely feature of English and Welsh villages, where the doctor, the grocer, the butcher and the farm labourer all lived in the same street.”<sup>276</sup>

The aim was to replicate communal village life in the city so that, “the official expectation was that estates would become permanent and stable communities with community associations and ideally an estate hall or centre.”<sup>277</sup> Those responsible attempted this by designing estates around green spaces with the hope that community would naturally form.<sup>278</sup> Indeed, Ravetz identifies a tension at play right from the start:

“A major dilemma was at what stage, and through whose efforts, a hall or centre should be built. Should it be there at the start so that the absence of premises did not impede the emergence of community life? In that case, tenants might take it for granted and not be duly appreciative. Or should it depend upon their own efforts, so affording a valuable lesson in practical democracy?”<sup>279</sup>

So often the high hopes for community were not realised. Indeed, this led to an increased sense of disconnection. Those living on estates are and were often isolated because shops, hospitals, services and churches were not found where they live.<sup>280</sup>

Furthermore, the Estates failed to cure inequality. Rather, as Hanley comments, people found new ways in which to distinguish between each other so that, “families who moved from the cities onto the new estates... could place themselves in a new class spectrum according to the poshness of the part of the estate they found themselves seconded to.”<sup>281</sup>

Differences might be identified in terms of when the housing was built, leading to differences of quality. Early aims to provide spacious, well-built houses and gardens often fell victim to the

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<sup>274</sup> Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 172.

<sup>275</sup> Linsey Hanley, *Estates*, 18.

<sup>276</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 34.

<sup>277</sup> Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 138.

<sup>278</sup> Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 138.

<sup>279</sup> Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 138.

<sup>280</sup> Gans, “From ‘Underclass’ to ‘Undercaste,’” 146.

<sup>281</sup> Linsey Hanley, *Estates*, 13.

pressures of space and cost so that the physical markers include whether or not you live in one such house or in a high-rise block and whether you live at the centre of the estate or at the outer edges. If the latter, then you are likely to be closer to privately owned housing, amenities and the connections offered through public transport.

Therefore, council estates marked out distinctions and divisions between the people who lived on the estates and in relation to those who did not. The latter happened because living on an estate excluded you from access to one of the great idols of Western society: choice. Hanley explains,

“The point is that most people now have a surfeit of choice in their lives at the same time as a large minority have none. That large minority tends to live on council estates whether in cities or outside of them. The 50 percent of poor people (that is whose incomes are less than 60 percent of the median average) who are homeowners also tend to live on council estates as beneficiaries of the right-to-buy-policy – proof, if any were needed, that a property-owning democracy doesn’t necessarily mean an equal one. They too have little choice where they live due to the fact that council housing – with the exception of one or two listed buildings in London – is never as desirable, and therefore can never be worth as much as private.”<sup>282</sup>

And so, the estates that offered hope have failed. Yet, surprisingly, the solution offered by Hanley and others such as Owen Jones is that we need a return to more council housing, not less, accompanied by greater restrictions on choice. Jones believes that the problems of estates are rooted in the intentional hostility of Margaret Thatcher’s governments to working class people, leading to the sale of council houses and the removal of funding for social housing. He comments,

“Councils were prevented from building new homes and, over the last eleven years, the party of Bevan has refused to invest money in the remaining houses under local authority control. As council housing collapsed, the remaining stock was prioritized for those most in need. ‘New tenants coming in, almost exclusively in order to meet stringent criteria, will either be single parents with dependent children, [or] people out of institutions including prisons,’ explained the late Alan Walter, a lifelong council tenant and chairman of the pressure group Defend Council Housing. ‘And therefore, they are almost by definition, those without work.’”<sup>283</sup>

Note too, his issue with right to buy schemes for tenants: it brought in that ugly word “choice.” This,

“drove a wedge through working class Britain, creating a divide between homeowners and council tenants. Right-to-buy meant that the best housing stock was sold off; and it was the relatively better off council tenants who were becoming homeowners. Those who remained council tenants tended to be poorer and in the worst homes.”<sup>284</sup>

Hanley has the same issue with choice and private provision. She uses the NHS as an analogy.

“Quite why most people are happy to depend on that great state monolith, the NHS, for their wellbeing but are loath to depend on council housing for their shelter is a slippery and complex question.”<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>282</sup> Linsey Hanley, *Estates*, 4.

<sup>283</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 34.

<sup>284</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 62.

<sup>285</sup> Linsey Hanley, *Estates*, 212.

Now, if I could let Hanley into a little secret, the answer is that people are often not “happy to depend on that great state monolith.” To give one minor example, I remember as a child the horror and stigma attached to NHS spectacles. These cheap, ugly plastic affairs set you out as the recipient of handouts. But in any case, Hanley advocates an equivalent “National Housing Service.”

It seems to me that this response is an attempt to ignore reality. If Thatcher were solely to blame, then why did estates already have a bad reputation by the time she came to power? Council house sales met a real demand as indeed did the other consumerist policies of Thatcherism such as share ownership and the types of school reforms continued by Labour, coalition and Conservative governments alike. This is not to say that Thatcherite capitalism is any less of an idol offering false hope. Rather, it is to point out that you cannot simply stop hunger for choice by denying it.

Furthermore, both Hanley and Jones acknowledge in their commentary the elephant in the room. The building of council estates did not solve the problems of poverty and inequality. Indeed, whilst it is natural to attach wicked motives to your political opponents, is it not possible to consider, without agreeing with their solution, that the very reason that the Thatcherites decided to sell council houses was to try and resolve some of these social issues where council estates had failed?

## **8.2 Political Hope**

One of the fascinating things about our present political climate is the level of agreement between politicians on both the left and right of the spectrum about the nature of the problem. This is not just about the centre-ground of politics either. Whether it’s radical socialists or what has been termed “the alt-right,” there is a high level of agreement that a substantial proportion of the population is alienated, demonised and left behind.

Let’s have a brief look at two examples: one from the radical left (Owen Jones, a newspaper columnist) and one from the radical right (Douglas Carswell, former Conservative and UKIP MP.)

### **8.2.1 Owen Jones, class-war and socialism**

In “Chavs,” Jones writes about the demonisation of the working classes through the use of pejorative language and offensive stereotypes. He particularly engages with the story of Shannon Matthews as a case study. In February 2008, Shannon Matthews went missing from her home in Dewsbury. Everybody feared the worst, assuming that she had been kidnapped. It turned out that her mum had in fact faked a kidnapping in order to generate money. Jones observes three things about the Matthews case:

First of all, he argues that the media was immediately less well disposed towards a working class family such as the Matthews than it was to a middle-class family such as Madelaine McCann’s parents where there was a much greater desire to help and offer resources.<sup>286</sup>

Secondly, he observes how, once Shannon was found, this opened the doors for an all-out media attack, not only on Shannon’s family but on their working-class, estate culture:

“Acting as the nation’s judges, juries and executioners, the tabloids turned on Dewsbury Moor. Local residents were fair game: after all, they had the audacity to live on the same streets as Karen Matthews. The estate became a template for similar working-class

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<sup>286</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 13-14.

communities up and down the country. ‘Estate is nastier than Beirut’ was one thoughtful *Sun* headline.”<sup>287</sup>

Thirdly, he suggests that this caricature required the media to take a shallow and simplistic view of things, overlooking the positive aspects of estate culture and community.

“Journalists had to be more than a little selective to create this caricature. They didn’t mention the fact that when the media became bored with some scruffy working-class girl vanishing ‘up north,’ the local community had compensated by coming together to find her. Scores of volunteers had tramped door to door with leaflets every night of her disappearance, often in pouring rain. They had booked coaches to take teams of people as far afield as Birmingham to hand out notices, while multi-lingual leaflets had been produced to cater for the area’s large Muslim population.”<sup>288</sup>

The result was that,

“This sense of a tightly knit working-class community, with limited resources, united behind a common cause, never became part of the Shannon Matthews story.”<sup>289</sup>

Jones sees the Shannon Matthews narrative as part of three-pronged attack on the working classes. This includes the media, as seen in the specific example, but also culture and politics.

The second prong, culture, includes the systematic takeover of traditionally working class institutions such as football by the middle-classes:

“Although major clubs shifted away from their origins long ago – for example, Manchester United was founded by railwaymen – they remained deeply rooted in working class communities. Footballers were generally boys plucked from the club’s local area.”<sup>290</sup>

Things began to change as more and more money went into football through sponsorship, satellite TV and the creation of the Premier League. Nothing seemed to signify this more than the end of standing terraces as a result of the Hillsborough disaster:

“When the old terraces were abolished after the Hillsborough Disaster, the cheaper standing tickets disappeared. Between 1990 and 2008, the price of the average football ticket rose by 600 percent, well over 7 times the rate of everything else. This was completely unaffordable for many working class people.”<sup>291</sup>

The cultural prong also includes overt mockery of working class culture disguised as art. Following the Second World War, there was an increased focus on working class life in books, plays and TV. Take, for example, “Coronation Street”, “A Taste of Honey” and “Only Fools and Horses.”<sup>292</sup> Working class life was portrayed grittily, at times darkly but at least sympathetically. However, working class stereotypes, especially the “chav,” increasingly became obvious targets for mockery, ridicule and easy laughs such as Harry Enfield’s Wayne and Waynetta Slob<sup>293</sup> or “Little Britain” and Vicky Pollard.

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<sup>287</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 20.

<sup>288</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 20-21.

<sup>289</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 21.

<sup>290</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 134.

<sup>291</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 135.

<sup>292</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*,

<sup>293</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 111.

In the latter case, Jones observes that, “we are laughing at two ex-private school boys dressing up as working class single mothers.”<sup>294</sup>

Then we have the third prong, politics, which Jones sees primarily through the prism of class war. From his perspective, right-wing, Conservative politicians exist to serve themselves and to protect the establishment elite. He cites an unnamed moderate Tory grandee saying:

“‘What you have to remember about the Conservative Party,’ he said, as though it was a trivial throwaway comment, ‘is that it is a coalition of privileged interests. Its main purpose is to defend that privilege. And the way it wins is by giving just enough to just enough other people.’”<sup>295</sup>

The class war, he argues, was escalated under Margaret Thatcher. Indeed, he detects in Thatcherite policies a vindictive seeking of revenge on the Trade Unions for the defeats inflicted on Ted Heath’s administration, particularly by the miners.<sup>296</sup> On Thatcherism, he comments,

“The demonization of the working class cannot be understood without looking back at the Thatcherite experiment of the 1980s that forged the society we live in today. At its core was an offensive against working class communities, industries, values and institutions. No longer was being working class something to be proud of: it was something to escape from. This vision did not come from nowhere. It was the culmination of a class war waged, on and off, by the Conservatives from over two centuries.”<sup>297</sup>

He goes on:

“There has been no greater assault on working-class Britain than Thatcher’s two-pronged attack on industry and trade unions. It was not just that the systematic trashing of the country’s manufacturing industries devastated communities – though it certainly did, leaving them ravaged by unemployment, poverty, and all the crippling social problems that accompanied them, for which they would later be blamed. Working class identity was itself under fire.”<sup>298</sup>

If he sees Thatcher’s actions as vindictive, he also sees a strategic intent in them. Just as Hillsborough and the end of football terraces was totemic for the cultural assault of working class life, so the 1984 Miners’ Strike marked the turning point politically.

“Retribution wasn’t the only motive. The miners had been the vanguard of the union movement in Britain throughout the twentieth century. Britain’s only general strike had been called in support of the miners in 1926. They had the capacity to single-handedly bring the country to a standstill by cutting off its energy supply, as they had demonstrated in the 1970s. If you could see off the miners, what other group of workers could stop you? That’s why the Miners’ Strike was the turning point in the history of modern working-class Britain.”<sup>299</sup>

Thatcherism was, he argues, an attempt to stop people thinking collectively, to prevent the working class from uniting against their oppressors. New Labour marked the Left’s complete capitulation to

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<sup>294</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 127.

<sup>295</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 40.

<sup>296</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 54.

<sup>297</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 40.

<sup>298</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 48.

<sup>299</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 55.

and continuation of this strategy. However, that capitulation and betrayal had been a long time in the making.<sup>300</sup>

“Labour’s repeated drubbing had consequences of its own. The idea that Labour gave a voice to working class people, that it championed their interests and needs, was severely weakened during the 1980s. On issue after issue, Labour under Kinnock capitulated to Thatcher’s free-market policies.”<sup>301</sup>

The effect of this was, in Owen Jones’ assessment, devastating.

“Those working class communities who had been most shattered by Thatcherism became the most disparaged. They were seen as the left-behinds, the remnants of an old world that had been trampled on by the inevitable march of history. There was to be no sympathy for them: on the contrary, they deserved to be caricatured and reviled.”<sup>302</sup>

So what solutions does Jones propose? These can be summed up as follows. First of all, increased taxes, both as a means to achieve greater equality through redistribution and to fund public services.<sup>303</sup> Secondly, greater availability of skilled employment.

“Another core demand must surely be for decent, skilled, secure, well paid jobs. It would not just be for the unemployed. It would also provide a possible alternative for many low-paid service sector workers.”<sup>304</sup>

And thirdly, a return to collectivism, including the restoration of Trade Unionism.

“The decline of the trade unions lies at the heart of many of the problems of the working class: the fact that they don’t have a voice; their stagnating wages; their lack of rights in the workplace and so on.”<sup>305</sup>

Jones believes that such policies have no reason to alienate the middle classes. Rather, the lower middle class benefit from education, health etc. funded properly and can’t access private insurance.<sup>306</sup> Indeed, the reason that socialist policies have been seen as harmful to the squeezed middle, in Jones’ opinion, is that the class boundaries have been drawn in the wrong places.

“Politicians and journalists have sneakily misrepresented what ‘Middle Britain’ actually is. One of the most successful things that the wealthy have done is to almost persuade the middle class that they are middle class too,’ says maverick journalist Nick Cohen. When politicians and journalists have used the term ‘Middle Britain’ (or ‘Middle England’), they have not been talking about people on median incomes – the median being, after all, only around £21,000 a year; they actually mean affluent votes in ‘Upper Britain’. This is how modest tax rises on the wealthy can be presented as attacks on ‘Middle Britain’, even though nine out of ten of us earn less than £44,000 a year.”<sup>307</sup>

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<sup>300</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 70.

<sup>301</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 70.

<sup>302</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 71.

<sup>303</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 258.

<sup>304</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 260.

<sup>305</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 266.

<sup>306</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 268.

<sup>307</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 250.

In other words, part of the solution involves re-imagining Britain. Rather than thinking in terms of a vast majority doing okay and a small minority who are left behind, society from a socialist perspective is divided between the many and the few, between the majority who are denied access to the very wealth they produce and a small oligarchy who control resources and power. This analysis is important when comparing the radical left with the radical right.

### 8.2.2 Douglas Carswell and the radical right

Douglas Carswell is a politician who used to represent the Southend constituency in the UK Parliament. Initially he sat as a Conservative, but, not long before the 2015 General Election, he defected to UKIP, who were campaigning for the UK to leave the EU. He managed to defend his seat successfully in both a subsequent by-election and the 2015 General Election. Carswell is seen as an original and independent-minded thinker on the right of politics.

The fascinating thing is that Carswell shares Jones' assessment of the problem insofar as he also identifies an elite few, or oligarchy which, to use language that many on the left would be comfortable with, he identifies as parasitical.<sup>308</sup>

“A new oligarchy is emerging right now throughout the Western world. The super rich are no longer millionaires but billionaires – often many times over”<sup>309</sup>

This is seen economically with many people feeling excluded and left behind by progress.

“It certainly is the case that for many millions in the United States, Britain and Europe, incomes have stagnated over the past twenty years. The average blue-collar household in America is no better off today than they were when Bill Clinton was in the White House. In fact, it's worse than that. The average hourly wage for non-management, private sector workers in America when adjusted for inflation has not risen since Ronald Reagan first entered the White House. For millions in the US, wages in 2016 are what they were in 1981.”<sup>310</sup>

In common with Jones, he sees those affected as a much larger group than a small underclass. Instead, he too sees those aggrieved as including those usually identified as lower-middle class. He argues that political reaction is not primarily from the have-nots but from people who are doing okay.<sup>311</sup>

Indeed, the problem is not economic failure, in his analysis. We are wrong to be pessimistic. The world is in fact getting better and we can demonstrate improvements in health, life expectancy, technology, food provision etc.<sup>312</sup> However, there is a problem of exclusion. He sums this up as follows:

“The super-rich are, as Boris Johnson puts it, building basement swimming pools in their London houses, yet many of their employees cannot afford to get on the housing ladder. They pay for private jets as their staff make do with ever longer commutes just to get to

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<sup>308</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 149-178.

<sup>309</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 8.

<sup>310</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 6.

<sup>311</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 6-7.

<sup>312</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 21.

work. As wages have been held down and corporate salaries have soared, unease about the inequality spawned by the new digital economy is growing.”<sup>313</sup>

Culturally, he also sees a group who are rejected, despised, sneered at. However, from his point of view, this primarily happens through political correctness:

“All cliques have manners and mannerisms that act as badges of acceptance. At times, the highly moralized linguistics of the politically correct can become a badge indicating membership of an in-group – an in-group of the self-righteousness.”<sup>314</sup>

The political dimension to the problem is seen in the way that our rulers have become remote and unassailable. This happens first of all because consensus politics denies us a choice at the ballot box.

“The politicians all seem to have agreed to agree on many of the big macro questions. The focus of legislative debate has narrowed to questions of which barely differing technocratic means are best suited to achieving the same uncritically accepted ends.”<sup>315</sup>

Secondly, politicians become remote and inaccessible because it is practically impossible to remove them. This significantly reduces their need to campaign and therefore engage with ordinary voters.

“Of course in the UK almost all parliamentary seats are ‘safe seats’, never shifting party allegiance at a General Election for as long as anyone can remember. Between 1987 and 2005 there were five General Elections in the UK. Yet in four of those five elections, only one in ten seats was won by a different party. Even in the great Labour landslide of 1997, fewer than three in ten seats changed hands.”<sup>316</sup>

This means that,

“in most seats, most MPs can assume that they are more or less immune from the views of the voters. Party insiders can be parachuted in as candidates for safe seats almost regardless of what the locals think. Which is precisely why in counties like Suffolk in England, although almost six in ten people voted to leave the EU, each of the county’s seven members of Parliament (all of whom are Conservatives) backed Remain.”<sup>317</sup>

When those who hold power have become remote and immune to challenge, this furthers the impression that they have got where they are unfairly. If there has been a tendency to talk about the undeserving poor, we may also identify an underserving elite. If politicians can get into power without truly having to earn the right through the ballot box, so too it is possible to get rich without earning your wealth. Contra Jones though, Carswell argues that the problem is not with capitalism per se but rather with its corruption. In his view, capitalism and market economics have worked.

“In Britain, the workforce has increased from 27 million to 31 million. Far from mass unemployment, there are more jobs in Britain and America today than ever before – and this great growth spurt in job-creation has coincided with greater global economic interdependence”<sup>318</sup>

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<sup>313</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 7.

<sup>314</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 19.

<sup>315</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 50.

<sup>316</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 53.

<sup>317</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 53.

<sup>318</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 80.

People are better off not just through increased employment and pay but through lower prices too.”<sup>319</sup>

“Since 1996, the real cost of household appliances has fallen by over 40 per cent. The cost of footwear and clothes by 60 per cent. Previous generations of mums and dads struggling to make ends meet complained about not being able to afford shoes for their kids. Today’s parents can buy them from Tesco for five quid.”<sup>320</sup>

However, the beneficiaries of this wealth creation are not necessarily the wealth creators themselves, he argues. Our economies are risk averse and do not always reward the entrepreneurs. Instead, the beneficiaries have, in his opinion, been corporate administrators who commit “corporate kleptocracy.”<sup>321</sup> He explains,

“In a free market, reward is associated with risk. But the FTSE 100 chiefs who get the largest rewards are not taking any risks with their own money. They are corporate administrators, not entrepreneurs. So why the big rewards? Corporate pay is not rising because of ‘the market’ but because conventional corporate governance no longer works. The rules that underpin capitalism, and which ought to make those that run businesses accountable to those that own them, have been subverted – allowing executives to pay themselves even more.”<sup>322</sup>

The remoteness and lack of accountability we see in political life repeats itself in corporate life too because boards are self-appointing with no accountability to individual shareholders<sup>323</sup> because most shares are actually held by pension and trust funds.

So what is Carswell’s solution? Well, he claims to be an optimist who offers hope. His trust is in the following things. First of all, economic and technological improvement: he believes that things really are getting better. Secondly, in the power of human-reason.<sup>324</sup> In fact Carswell opposes God and religion, believing that these get in the way of reason and innovation.<sup>325</sup> Furthermore, he associates religion with dependency on grand plans.<sup>326</sup> So, thirdly, he wants to let the market system do its job.<sup>327</sup> This means getting rid of middle-men, regulators and grand planners so that contracts are directly between two consenting parties.<sup>328</sup> Furthermore, it means the removal of cheap, easy credit through monetarist policies.<sup>329</sup> Finally, he advocates greater power to individuals so that they have more power over the state. For Carswell, this requires greater localism, more direct democracy and the breakdown of traditional party systems.<sup>330</sup>

### 8.2.3 Some brief reflections on the left-right debate

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<sup>319</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 80.

<sup>320</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 80.

<sup>321</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 84.

<sup>322</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 85.

<sup>323</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 90.

<sup>324</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 249.

<sup>325</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 250.

<sup>326</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 250.

<sup>327</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 250.

<sup>328</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 243.

<sup>329</sup> His reasoning is that credit hands power to the bankers who are one example of the parasitical corporate administrators. Carswell, *Rebel*, 306 – 307.

<sup>330</sup> Carswell, *Rebel*, 373 – 376.

I would like at this stage to make a few short observations about these political solutions. A detailed engagement with the pros and cons of each position is beyond the scope of this present work.

However, we may observe first of all that both authors are much closer than one might assume to a common assessment of the problem. For both of them, it boils down to the existence of an elite, unaccountable oligarchy who keep power and prosperity to themselves. At the same time, they are wildly apart in their identification of possible solutions. I would suggest from this first of all that if their reason and empirical observations lead them to this, then this highlights both the viability of reason and empirical evidence as sources of truth and the limits. They are able to apply their minds to the same data, the same issues and yet not reach agreement on a way forward. Secondly, the fact that both men share a common concern suggests to me that the use of hyperbolic arguments to question the motives of political opponents and demonise them is rather overplayed and unbecoming.<sup>331</sup>

Furthermore, in terms of their ability to identify solutions, it is my opinion that both authors tend to be long on problem identification and very short on solution. Their solutions lack development, are often simplistic and sound very familiar. In Jones' case, we see the state solutions of higher taxes, nationalisation and union power which we associate with the 1970s. Carswell's approach in many respects could be labelled "Thatcherism revisited."

Yet, as we have already observed, there was a reason why Thatcher's policies were seen as popular. In many quarters, the socialist solutions of the 70s were seen to fail. Similarly, there is a reason why 40% of the population voted for a political party led by a committed socialist in 2017, not to mention all those who voted for populist and nationalist options at that election and over the past few decades. Many people experienced Thatcherism not as a good thing but as harmful.

Now the tendency with advocates of radical political positions is to insist that a pure form of their approach has never been properly tried or that a little more education will convince the doubters. That to me seems both naïve and arrogant at the same time. Is it not more likely that flawed and finite politicians do not after all have all the solutions? That's why we tend to see a constant pendulum of political hope swinging backwards and forwards between left and right.

#### **8.2.4 Brexit**

Writing from a British perspective, we cannot move on from a discussion about political hopes without mentioning Brexit. The UK joined what evolved into the European Union in the 1970s and there was a referendum to confirm this decision in 1975. Over 40 years later in 2016, a further referendum resulted in a decision to leave. For nearly half a century, the UK's relationship to Europe has proved one of the most toxic and divisive political issues. It has divided both of the major political parties at different points and arguably cost at least three Prime Ministers their jobs.<sup>332</sup>

The two people we have engaged with already represent the two main positions on EU membership. Carswell is Euro-sceptic and a former UKIP MP, whilst Jones has consistently campaigned for Remain. However, the issue transcends the usual Left-Right divide. There are Eurosceptics in both the Labour Party and in the Conservative Party as well as Euro-enthusiasts.

Supporters of the EU see it as a means to encourage greater European unity. The project was in part a response to the two terrible World Wars that cost so many lives during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>331</sup> This sadly comes through heavily in Jones' book which is more polemic rant than reasoned argument. In my opinion, his work is poorer for it.

<sup>332</sup> Margaret Thatcher, David Cameron and Theresa May.

century. By creating a powerful trading block with a single internal market, the EU is also seen as offering economic hope and believed to have encouraged greater prosperity. The EU is also seen as offering protection against the failures and tyrannies of state governments. The European Court of Justice offers potential remedies when states fail. Furthermore, through regulatory means, the EU is seen as providing protection against the more malign elements of capitalism.

Negatively, Eurosceptics see the EU as a monolithic, distant and remote bureaucracy. For Carswell, this would provide an example of the type of parasitical third parties who attempt to control through top-down planning. Its institutions are also seen as democratically unaccountable, although the elected parliament's powers have evolved over the years. Ironically, whilst many on the left see the EU as a bastion against the worst excesses of capitalism, it has traditionally been seen on the far left as a capitalist project. Once again, the perception from both left and right is that the EU forms part of the oligarchy narrative.

How does this affect urban witness? Well, I remember the Sunday after the referendum vote and a number of our congregation were deeply despondent, including those about to lead the service. They were in mourning and this was likely to affect the tone and content of the service with a theme of lament and repentance. I had to remind them that for many people likely to attend that Sunday, the feeling would be the opposite: one of freedom, celebration and joy. This reflects the fact that our catchment area includes two very different types of neighbourhood.

On the one hand, the Brexit message had played well on council estates amongst white, working class voters. Voting Leave was an opportunity for those excluded and left behind by the liberal elite to protest and maybe even take back control. The campaign had focused heavily on immigration with the promise that leaving the EU would enable us to take back control of our borders and end mass immigration.

On the other hand, in the more ethnically diverse, inner city part of our community, exactly because of the racial overtones of the Leave campaign, there was greater support for Remain (this may well also reflect a younger population too). Many within our community have come to the UK from other EU countries and the decision to leave has caused them great anxiety and uncertainty.

### **8.3 Religious Hope**

Alongside socio-economic and political offers of hope, we also find overtly religious offers (shortly we will see that the socio-economic and political options have in fact a deeply religious dimension too). In this chapter, I want to highlight Islam here and then introduce a few alternative Gospels within the Christian tradition.

There are, of course, hundreds if not thousands of religious options out there, but I have chosen these three because they are both typically representative of religion and dominant in terms of the most common challenges we are likely to face.

#### **8.3.1 Islam**

According to the Office for National Statistics, there are 3,372,966 Muslims in the UK.<sup>333</sup> 1,012,823 live in London with 234,411 in Birmingham and 129,041 in my home city, Bradford.<sup>334</sup> Many Muslims

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<sup>333</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/aboutus/transparencyandgovernance/freedomofinformationfoi/muslimpopulationintheuk/>

<sup>334</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/870608/leading-cities-by-muslim-population-england/>

are either immigrants or second or even third generation descendants. However, the figures also include converts to Islam from white and black backgrounds. For example, one report estimates that,

- There were 60,669 converts to Islam in the UK in 2001 with 55% from white British backgrounds
- 5,200 people in the UK converted to Islam in 2010.
- By 2010, the estimated number of converts may have been in the region of 100,000.<sup>335</sup>

There are also significant numbers of conversions to Islam among prisoners, particularly those from African and Afro-Caribbean backgrounds. As BBC Correspondent Mark Easton reported,

“Around 30% of Muslim inmates are converts and many of those are, according to previous Home Office research, from black rather than Asian ethnic groups. In 1999, it was found that 37% of Muslim male prisoners were black compared with 7% of those in the wider population.”<sup>336</sup>

Muslims believe in one God, Allah. The religion is believed to have been founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century by Mohammed, recognised by Muslims as the last and greatest prophet. Muslims believe that he received their holy book, **The Quran**, by direct revelation from God. They believe that Jesus was also a prophet but not divine, as were many of the great patriarchs of the Old Testament. The Law, Prophets and Gospels are recognised as Scripture; however, the versions we have today have been so badly corrupted that they cannot be relied upon as revelation.

The word “Islam” literally means submission. Muslims are those who submit to the one true God. Allah is sovereign and unchangeable. He is also hoped to be merciful. A devout Muslim will be committed to serving God with their whole life. This also means that the practice of Islam should be seen as a unified whole, embracing religious, political and cultural aspects of life. Indeed, the spread of Islam during its early centuries was marked by political expansion and the conquest of much of North Africa by the Caliphate. So-called “Islamic State” (ISIS) is a contemporary attempt to recreate the Islamic empire of the past.

At the same time, Islam is fragmented. There are a number of strands of Islam, some with a more mystical take on life. The most obvious (but not only) division is between Sunni and Shia Muslims. There are also Sufi Muslims who tend to practise a more mystical form of Islam and as well as other sects, many Muslims practise in effect a folk religion with an alertness and fear of spiritual beings known as Jinn.

Additionally, Peter Riddell has identified the following three typological relationships to Islamic teaching and practices:

- Muslim Traditionalists
- Muslim Modernisers
- Islamists

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<sup>335</sup> <https://faith-matters.org/images/stories/fm-reports/a-minority-within-a-minority-a-report-on-converts-to-islam-in-the-uk.pdf>

<sup>336</sup> [https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markeaston/2010/06/islam\\_prison\\_1.html](https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/thereporters/markeaston/2010/06/islam_prison_1.html)

Note this “typology” fits fairly neatly with a Christian typology of liberals, traditionalists and evangelicals. It can therefore be recognised as a helpful simplification and we need to keep in mind the additional complexities of different types of Muslim doctrine and culture.

#### **8.3.1.1 Muslim Traditionalists**

“Muslim traditionalists emphasize the primacy of the scholarly elite, with congregations trained to acknowledge the wisdom of accumulated traditional authority rather than to engage dynamically with the primary sources themselves. In Muslim minority communities in western countries, Muslim traditionalists tend to be the immigrant generation.”<sup>337</sup>

#### **8.3.1.2 Muslim Modernisers**

“Muslim modernisers are concerned with defining faith within a contemporary world context. They follow a method of interpreting the Islamic texts to fit the modern context.”<sup>338</sup>  
Includes secularized and cultural Muslims.<sup>339</sup>

#### **8.3.1.3 Islamists**

“Islamists use Islamic Scripture as the filter through which all discussion passes. They dream of a past ‘golden age’ when Prophet Muhammed was establishing his community **om** Medina and when God’s law, the shari’a, held sway. Many Muslim young people born in the West of immigrant parents opt for the Islamist paradigm, because of a sense of alienation from the majority culture.”<sup>340</sup>

#### **8.3.1.4 Fragmentation by way of **I**ntegration and engagement**

Fragmentation can also be seen by the attitudes of Muslims living in non-Islamic countries to engagement and integration in the host nation. Peter Riddell notices two typical trends among Muslims in Britain.

##### **“Option 1: Participate”<sup>341</sup>**

Riddell argues that “The majority of Muslims in Britain are committed to participating in British society as an integral element in it. They see Britain as their home and their future.”<sup>342</sup> He includes within this definition both those who want to “blend in and assimilate”<sup>343</sup> and those who want to “participate and influence society.”<sup>344</sup>

He argues that the former group (assimilators) are likely to be increasingly influenced by the western secular society around them until their Islamic identity is significantly watered down.

“This is the group whose Muslim identity may weaken with succeeding generations through intermarriage, secularist influences and conversion to another religion or no religion.”<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.

<sup>338</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.

<sup>339</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.

<sup>340</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.

<sup>341</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 61.

<sup>342</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 61.

<sup>343</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 61.

<sup>344</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 62.

<sup>345</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 62.

The influencers, on the other hand, are likely to recognise creation of fully Islamic society is unrealistic. However, their approach “is based on the notion that Muslims in Britain should participate fully in the majority society but should strengthen their Muslim identity and try to impart Muslim values and views in the process.”<sup>346</sup>

### **“Option 2: separate”<sup>347</sup>**

Muslim identity and culture within the UK also includes those who are “separating within Britain” and those “preparing to leave Britain to live in Muslim majority countries.”<sup>348</sup> Some Muslims find themselves so disillusioned with Western culture that they seek an alternative life in countries that better support the practice of Islamic belief and customs.

On the other hand, there are those who do not wish to integrate and participate in UK life and culture but wish to live here following their own beliefs and customs distinct from British culture. This includes those who are campaigning for right to follow shari’a law in the UK.<sup>349</sup> It will include those who desire to co-exist peacefully alongside other communities. However, within this category are also Islamists who agree with the pessimism amongst influencers that a fully Islamic society is possible through integration but still seek to achieve that through other means.

### **8.3.2 Alternative “Christian” Gospels**

Within the Christian tradition, there have been a number of attempts to offer versions of the Gospel that will appeal particularly to the poor and dispossessed. Often these traditions require a rejection of the authority of Scripture and a departure from central beliefs about sin and the cross.

#### **8.3.2.1 The Social Gospel**

Christians have consistently throughout history had a strong association with social activism and the desire to show God’s love practically. The Evangelical movement is particularly associated with William Wilberforce and the abolition of slavery as well as factory reform, the founding of schools and the availability of medical provision prior to the founding of the NHS.

However, the concept of a social gospel is primarily associated with liberal theology. From this perspective, Christ’s mission was to set a better example of what it means to live a good life showing concern for the vulnerable and the poor. Christian mission from this perspective includes famine relief, education, environmental concern, food banks and debt cancellation. Christians are first and foremost called to act to bring about change in society.

#### **8.3.2.2 The Prosperity Gospel**

This is the belief that our essential problem is sickness and poverty. We were made in God’s image to enjoy health and wisdom. We were made to enjoy the goodness of creation by subduing the world around us. Therefore, if we are poor, sick and powerless, then we fall short of what God made us for.

How then, can we be restored to what God intended for us? The answer is by exercising faith. Faith is demonstrated in the words we say (hence this is often known as “The Word of Faith Movement.”). Promises are to be claimed and there must be no place for negative, defeatist thoughts. If believers

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<sup>346</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 62.

<sup>347</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 62.

<sup>348</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 62.

<sup>349</sup> Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 62.

exercise enough faith, demonstrated by the prayers they say and by tithing, then God will bless them with all they need.

### 8.3.2.3 Liberation Theology

Liberation Theology may be seen as a close cousin of the Social Gospel. However, whereas the Social Gospel is primarily paternalistic with an emphasis on those who have helping those who don't, Liberation Theology has a more radical edge with its promise of liberation for the poor and dispossessed so that power is placed back into their hands. Additionally, whereas the Social Gospel is mainly associated with liberal Protestantism, Liberation Theology is essentially a Roman Catholic ideology.

This approach is particularly associated with South American and Spanish theologians, particularly as [Gustavo Gutiérrez](#), [Leonardo Boff](#), [Juan Luis Segundo](#) and [Jon Sobrino](#). In this approach, greed is seen as the primary sin and the cause of poverty. The poor are victims and the Gospel promises freedom for them. This theology is very much rooted in the Exodus narrative and therefore, unsurprisingly, in addition to Hispanic versions, some forms of Black theology are deeply sympathetic to the theme.<sup>350</sup>

### 8.3.3 Initial Reflections

One can immediately see why these approaches appear to offer hope and are likely to be popular. They all respond to people's felt needs by offering practical help and hope. Additionally, Social Gospel approaches offer meaning and purpose to Christians seeking to serve on mission in communities where there is a hardness and resistance to the preached message. Our church may not be seeing converts but we are still fulfilling the Great Commission in the work that we do.

Furthermore, those offers of help tend to play into two of our deepest temptations. First of all, they set the narrative up in terms of injustice, unfairness and victimhood. The redemptive narrative is that we live in a world where particular people and entities hold power. The minority who hold power are essentially wicked whilst the majority of us who do not are essentially good. We are the victims and we need to be rescued from the bad guys. The temptation for those entering into such situations on a missional basis is either to present themselves as the heroes, the rescuers, or to attempt to self-identify with those they are coming to as fellow victims. At the same time, people coming into a situation in order to help are unlikely to be seen as fellow victims or heroic rescuers but rather as oppressors. They become part of the problem.

At the same time, the offer of hope in political and religious redemptive offers is also wrapped up in false promise that somehow we can save ourselves. There is often a collectivist element to this – the workers can rise up against the bourgeois; a racial grouping can, in its collective identity, stand firm against colonial oppressors. However, the primary message is that by learning the right words, practising the right rituals and developing the right behaviours it is possible to save yourself.

In chapter 7, we observed that all people in common are asking the following big questions: “Who am I? What is my purpose in life? Where did I come from? What are the origins of the world around me? Is there more than this? Does God exist and who is he?” and “What happens when I die?”

Urban dwellers need to recognise that their urban gods have failed to answer those questions, failing to bring truth or hope. From there, we may take them to Christ in order to show them where truth and hope are found and where their real needs and desires will be properly met and fulfilled.

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<sup>350</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation\\_theology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liberation_theology)

## 9 Turning from idols

In the last chapter, I identified a number of redemptive offers, alternative hope offered from religious, political, social or economic perspectives. At the end of the chapter I observed that these alternative solutions have several things in common.

- They encourage people to assume a victim identity. The world is then divided between a powerful minority who act as the oppressors and a weak majority who are oppressed.
- Hope is found in human saviours. Their primary role is as educators, bringing the truth and exposing the secret reality.
- However, salvation is something possible through self-help, especially when this happens collectively.

In that chapter, we began to see why those offers of hope ultimately fail because they are the offers of empty idolatry. We put our trust in false saviours who cannot save. In this chapter we want to spend a little bit more time thinking about how we expose the lie. Remember that our aim in all of this is “subversive fulfilment.” This recognised that there are points of contact, a shared hope that can only be fulfilled in Christ but also that there are points of departure. People have sought fulfilment in the wrong places and therefore not only do they need to turn to Christ to find fulfilment but they also need to turn from the idols (the subversive bit).

In Jeremiah 2:13, the prophet utters these words from the Lord

*“For my people have done two evil things:  
They have abandoned me—  
the fountain of living water.  
And they have dug for themselves cracked cisterns  
that can hold no water at all!”*

Notice that sin is both the failure to trust in God and the active decision to seek alternative sources of life, refreshment and hope. God is the one who offers permanent living water but we choose to dig our own wells, yet those wells or cisterns are unable to provide water.

Jeremiah goes on to show how this has led to a form of slavery, equivalent to the previous period of slavery in Egypt and about to be fully realised by a new exile to Babylon.<sup>351</sup> The very people they put their trust in, who they looked to save them became their oppressors, they were ensnared in and trapped.<sup>352</sup>

This is important to recognise as we look at our own contexts. It is fascinating that Islam is looked to in many inner-city communities as offering salvation and yet the underpinning theme of Islam is submission and servitude. This is reflected in the overall philosophy of the religion, people are called to submit as the slaves or servants of Allah an impersonal God in the hope that he will somehow, someday be merciful but without confidence of this. Islam as it is practiced in many cultures also leads to a particular submission of women who are expected to wear the veil and be secluded away from society and often sadly for the vulnerable where those with disabilities have no status or value in the community.

Similarly, we frequently see how political trajectories often end in disappointment. Populist politicians who get out early enough find lucrative positions to enjoy future wealth on the back of

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<sup>351</sup> Jeremiah 2:14.

<sup>352</sup> Jeremiah 2:18.

the fame they have discovered. Meanwhile the politicians who appeared to speak for the oppressed and to be authentic disappoint. Corbynism offered straight talking hope, a man willing to speak up for the people against injustice. Yet, an anti-racism campaigner oversaw the infiltration of a mainstream political party with the toxic plague of anti-Semitism and the “straight talking anti-politician proved as able to dissemble when questioned as the rest of the political classes.

Prosperity Gospels turn out to be nothing but Ponzi schemes. They may offer liberation from poverty but in fact, it is only a few people who make it to the top of the pyramid. The reality is that if they have got rich, it has not been through putting their faith in God but through having many poorer people put their faith in the pastor and handing over their tithes. Far from setting people free, such lies enslave people to their religious leaders.

We are reminded again of Romans 1-3. The overall theme of these chapters is that far from the world being divided between the good guys and the bad.

*“No one is righteous— not even one.”<sup>353</sup>*

*<sup>23</sup> For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard.<sup>354</sup>*

I believe that there has to be a point in any gospel conversation where the person we are talking with stops thinking of themselves as primarily the victim and realises that they are the problem. How does that happen? Well, first of all, it involves gently walking through specific situations with them and helping them to see their own agency and responsibility in the situation. This is not to deny the reality of the oppression and harm that they have faced. Rather it is to highlight their own culpability. To be clear, this is not about shifting blame from victim to abuser. We should never create narratives to take responsibility away from such people nor add to abuse with blame and shame.

Yet, even if I have experienced bullying and abuse this does not excuse my own sinful behaviour in other contexts. I am reminded at this point of an author I read some time back dealing with the issue of abuse in the home. The author was experienced in counselling abusers towards repentance. They noted that often the person would claim that they were “out of control” and yet when they talked through the situation, they helped the counselee recognise that at various points in the abuse they had demonstrated by their choice of context (not losing it in public) and the boundaries they set on how far they went, knowing how to restrict their abuse to a tongue lashing or inflicting pain but stopping short of causing serious injury or death that they were very much in control.

It is helpful to invite someone to recognise that as well as the systemic problems that they see, that much pain and suffering starts in the home and starts with us. My ultimate problem is that I am a law breaker and that I have failed in the relationships where it counts. God’s Law is summed up by two requirements, first that we love him whole-heartedly and second that we love our neighbours as ourselves. The two are interlinked. I love my neighbour best when I honour and worship God. I demonstrate my love for the God I cannot see by my love for my brother and friend who I can see.

Yet, most of us when reminded of this truth know deep down that we fail on both counts. God is not number one and central in our lives. We live day to day as though he does not exist. Similarly, when challenged on this, I have to admit that far from loving others as I should, I have let down those I

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<sup>353</sup> Romans 3:10

<sup>354</sup> Romans 3:23.

love the most, frequently and I have hurt those closest to me, often those who have poured so much love into my life with the things I think, do and say, not to mention the things fail to do and say.

Furthermore, Romans 1 and 2 are both clear that we are without excuse in our failing. WE have the benefit of both General Revelation and Special Revelation to show us what God is like, why he is worthy of our love and how to demonstrate this love for him in our love for each other.

Of course, these conversations are dependent upon the work of the Holy Spirit to begin bringing conviction of sin. I don't think we really can get people to accept their culpability simply by trying tell and explain, certainly not by badgering. Their blindness to their own sin is spiritual and so they need their spiritual eyes opened. Only God can do that and without prayer we labour in vain. Yet, as the Holy Spirit softens hearts, it is my view that we will rarely need to spell out to people that they are sinners. This will dawn on them as God shines light in their lives.

When this realisation comes, there is also the dawning realisation that they have been, to use the language of Romans 1, handed over. Far from being wise they are fools, far from being in the know, they are ignorant, far from being free, they are trapped, enslaved to their passions and used by others for their own benefits.

This dawning realisation is about conviction of sin, recognising the ugliness of the idols they have worshipped, and the empty futility of the false hope offered to them. There needs to be a rejection and repudiation of these alternative redemption offers. I find the words of confession offered by the prodigal son helpful here. Remember how the younger son has demanded his inheritance and headed off to a far country in order to spend it. He runs out of money and famine strikes so that we find him taking a job looking after pigs.

<sup>17</sup>“When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, ‘At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! <sup>18</sup>I will go home to my father and say, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, <sup>19</sup>and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.””<sup>355</sup>

Notice the crucial thing here is that he recognises his status. He is in a worse position than servants. He is horror struck at what things have come to. The repentant person needs to realise that there is no beauty, goodness or hope in their circumstances. It means realising the emptiness of the other redemptive offers. The cisterns are cracked and dry. More than that, the lost son owns up and admits that he is at fault. He is “no longer worthy...” Repentance is more than grief at my circumstances it involves putting my hand up and owning my culpability. It means saying:

“I have sinned.”

This is the point when hope can be fulfilled in Christ.

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<sup>355</sup> Luke 15:17-19.

Part 4

Showing Off

## 10 Proclamation in context

Well, we have finally arrived at the summit of our discussion. This is where we want to be. We've stepped in, searched out, showed up and now it is time to show off. The point is not that we now show off our learning or our righteousness. Rather, we get to show off Christ in all his radiant glory as the only hope.

In this book, we have been encouraging each other to see ourselves as missionaries to urban contexts, whether that is as someone crossing cultural and geographical boundaries moving into a different area or those of us who find ourselves called to share the good news in the place we grew up and to people we grew up with. The title "missionary" applies equally to paid pastors, pioneer planters and those who are part of the core membership of a church.

The role of the missionary is first and foremost to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. JH Bavinck held to a high view of this proclamation, or preaching it its widest sense, as demonstrated by two tremendous quotes. First of all, he says,

"What is preached, the content of preaching, is not a theory, not a philosophical system, but it is God himself. We are not postmen but ambassadors of Christ."<sup>356</sup>

Then he goes on to add,

"Our preaching is the place where the living Christ encounters a lost and confused mankind."<sup>357</sup>

This means that the person who shares the Gospel has a high responsibility, privilege and duty. We are representing God himself and our aim is to see people encounter God through the Gospel. This means that whether it is in a sermon to a crowd, Bible study with a small group or in 1-1 conversation, something special is happening when the good news is announced. It can never be a mere intellectual exercise: God himself, through the Holy Spirit, is present, active and at work.

Bavinck suggests that the preacher has four important questions to consider before they begin to speak:

1. Who are we preaching to?<sup>358</sup>
2. Who is the person preaching and what is their relationship to the audience? "A father speaks differently to a child than a child speaks to his friend."<sup>359</sup>
3. When the encounter takes place. "One speaks differently to a person when he is sick in bed than when he is in the middle of his work."<sup>360</sup>
4. The place where the gospel encounter happens – home, neutral or hostile territory for the recipient.<sup>361</sup>

Once again, we are being encouraged to contextualise. The Gospel is not communicated **in abstract**. What this means is that when we seek to share the good news, even at the point of proclamation, it

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<sup>356</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 81-82.

<sup>357</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 82.

<sup>358</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 82.

<sup>359</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 83.

<sup>360</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 85.

<sup>361</sup> Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 86.

is not about blurting out a message, shouted across the street, or necessarily a stylised evangelistic sermon. At this point, I am reminded of that old hallmark of evangelism: the tract. A tract would often start with a witty story, a piece of fascinating historical information or discussion of a practical problem. Then, suddenly and without warning, the last page would become densely thick with Bible quotes as the Gospel was shoe-horned in. That is both an ineffective way of doing things and, let's be open about it, pushing the boundaries of integrity.

So, at this stage, it is good, once again, to ask these questions: who are we preaching to? and what is the most effective way of preaching? In other words, how will we contextualise our showing off? This means that the answer we give needs to be consistently in line with our lived lives amongst people and to genuinely answer the questions they have, fulfilling their declared needs.

Practically, this does touch upon how we go about ministry and mission. Here are a few thoughts to consider. First of all, if church planting, or revitalising, then we need to look at the nature of the team that take on the task at the start. It is my opinion that traditional church planting methods where a church sends a large group to an area to start to gather as a church will not work. At worst, the church will become a church for complete outsiders who commute in. At best, you will end up with a group of people who have moved onto the estate and are seen with suspicion.

You need a (probably small) group of people who will commit to live in that community. They need to make their lives among the people. This means that you cannot have a situation where the entire group treat the location as a commuter village, returning home at night from work in the city. That does not mean that everyone gives up their jobs and tries to find local work. There may be other problems with that. It does mean that you need to find ways of becoming part of life on the estate or in the neighbourhood. This may include little things such as thinking about where your children go to school and where you shop.

A further practical point is that we may be rushing towards one goal: the goal of an established public gathering on the estate that causes us to focus in on one area and miss other possibilities. This is why we tend to focus on getting the twenty to thirty people together in order to plant our church with enough people to form a congregation, provide a music group and staff the Sunday School. This assumes of course that the people need to be invited to the Sunday service to hear the proclamation. Yet if the proclamation is growing naturally out of our life in an area, if there is a direct link between stepping in and showing off, then this may not be so. Rather, we may wish to focus much more on developing a community of believers in an area.

So, let's stick with a scenario where there are 30 people ready to move to an area and plant a church. In classic church thinking terms, we will assume that we are best to focus on getting the one church up and running. Yet this may not be the best way forward. What if, instead, we aimed to plant 3-6 churches in a larger geographical area. Instead of 30 people moving to one area, we would have groups of 5-10 moving into several areas. Each would begin to witness in its area as a missional community and each would begin to see fruit from gospel conversations. Each of the groups could gather together with the others in a central place for as long as this was possible and necessary, but the aim would be for each to become a church in its own right. We are not looking for the fullest church in our city but for a city full of churches.

Related to this is the question of tentmaking ministry. This term is based on Acts 18:1-4.

*"Then Paul left Athens and went to Corinth.<sup>2</sup> There he became acquainted with a Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently arrived from Italy with his wife, Priscilla. They had left Italy when*

*Claudius Caesar deported all Jews from Rome.<sup>3</sup> Paul lived and worked with them, for they were tentmakers just as he was.”*

Now, there has been some discussion in recent times about the need for bi-vocational or tent-maker workers. There is an argument that to really multiply churches, we will need more of this type of worker giving part of their time to Gospel work and part to earning a living. There is a further argument for this which is that the secular work may create evangelistic opportunities, providing it is in the context of the mission.

However, I've heard a number of people argue that this would simply not be possible in working class and estate contexts and especially with indigenous working class pastors who haven't got an educational background or the social connections to work a lucrative career. After all, if I can go down from 5 days to 2 or 3 and still earn £30k, then that does free up time for mission. However, if I have to travel long distances and work long hours, 5 or even 6 days per week at a labour-intensive job, assuming that there is suitable work available, then that is more likely to have a detrimental effect on ministry.

So, it is important to make two observations here. The first stands out immediately in the text. Paul was able to do the work because he had friends who got him to join in with them. It wasn't that he had to go and find work for himself. Other believers found a way in which he could do the work and because they will have been in control of the business, it meant that there would have been flexibility so that his gospel ministry would never have been put in jeopardy by his secular work.

Secondly, remember that Paul operated as part of an apostolic band. He was part of a team. So again, what we see here is that there are one or two people within the team who are using their work to support the whole gospel effort. Indeed, it begins to look like the reverse of our modern situation where lots of people support a few financially for the work of the Gospel and more that a few support the many. It is important that we recognise that value of the few with something sharing it with the many without. It is also important that when planning to plant, we look not just at personal support but also at how the whole effort will become viable.

The whole effort is about seeing a group of people who love the Lord able to live in a community and work together, coming alongside one another and the people around them so that at the shops, the school gate, the workplace etc. people who don't know Jesus come into contact with people who do and hear the good news about him.

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## 11 A new hope

Sometimes we describe the effect of the Gospel in terms of seeing Eden restored. From this perspective, sin is forgiven and the consequences of the Fall are removed so that our hope is that those who turn to Christ will return in effect to that state of innocence which humanity experienced prior to the Fall. We know that this will not be complete in this lifetime, but our expectation is that when Christ returns, the new creation will involve a restoration of the Heavens and the Earth to what they used to be.

Sometimes such a perspective and expectation can reinforce the kind of perspective that works against Gospel witness to our cities. If we are hungering for a return to Edenic paradise, of a world before cities and industry, then we may find ourselves sanctifying the desire to escape from our cities. A theology of “paradise restored” may cause us to seek the suburbs. Of course, strictly speaking, we should be moving out to the countryside to live the good life, but that would mean giving up on the convenience we still desire as well. So, the suburbs offer us compromise! They are the “now and not yet” of our eschatology.

Yet, when we look at Scripture, we see much more than just the restoration of Eden. The Biblical narrative offers progress, sometimes referred to as “from garden to garden city.” At the close of Revelation, we are offered a vision of God’s holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down to earth. Let me remind you of David Smith’s words which I quoted earlier on:

“It is well known that the story told in the Bible begins in a garden and ends in a city. The world as created by God is a rural paradise in which complete harmony exists between human beings and their maker, and between people and all other created beings. God himself is said to have looked on this scene and declared that it was ‘very good’ (Gen 1:31). But in the final chapter of the Bible, after the long and complex story that has unfolded since Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, it is a city that comes into view as the ultimate goal and hope of human history. In this vision, the glory of God is no longer displayed in a natural wilderness, but rather shines with great brilliance in a vast and holy city (Rev. 21:10-11).”<sup>362</sup>

Now, the city imagery there is intended to represent the church and its place in the New Creation, so we are not meant to imagine a literal, huge metropolis arriving like some alien spaceship. Yet, that the Bible uses city imagery positively to give us a vision of the future should encourage us in two ways. First, we are meant to see cities positively as well as negatively. Secondly, it reinforces a Biblical narrative that presents the intended future as a development from and improvement on Eden.

This perspective may cause us to think more deeply about the purpose of cities and whether this purposes is redeemable. If so, do churches have a place in the city beyond simply being present because that’s where people are? Smith argues that cities in the ancient world had a spiritual or sacred purpose so that,

“The era of the great urban empires reached its culminating point in the rise to world dominance of Rome, centred on a city which both in its size and glory exceeded any urban settlement previously seen on earth. This too was a ‘sacred city’ in the sense that it came to

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<sup>362</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 19.

be viewed as the outcome of prophecies which placed Rome at the centre of the purposes of the gods.”<sup>363</sup>

In that case, a city will reflect and magnify the gods worshipped by the people there. Modern cities will reflect and magnify our worship of materialistic humanism. Yet there is also a suggestion of longing in all of this. Our human hope is that cities will be good places. Smith goes on to argue that,

“For Plato and Aristotle then, the fundamental question concerned the purpose of the city: for what end does it exist, and what is required for it to fulfil this objective? The answer was related to what constituted ‘goodness’ and, while this might be the subject of legitimate discussion, it was clear that a good society would be one in which the citizens flourished as members together of a virtuous community.”<sup>364</sup>

Throughout this book, I’ve been arguing that our mission involves “subversive fulfilment.” In other words, we believe that humans have dreams, longings, hopes that are good and God given. However, those dreams and hopes are distorted by idolatry. Subversive fulfilment is about, first of all, subverting those dreams by challenging and correcting the idolatrous distortion, and then providing a means for those corrected dreams to be fulfilled in Christ.

This should mean that if there is a good and proper longing for cities to be places of goodness where people flourish, then part of what the church is about is to see cities become those places. A city can never be a place where good is seen, the community is virtuous and citizens flourish so long as those people are worshipping false gods and idols. However, whenever the people of the city turn to the one true, living God, then this means they will now be able to work towards creating that very “virtuous community.” There will be a sense of flourishing now which offers a small foretaste of what is to come.

Indeed, that greater vision has been present in Reformed thinking from the off. Smith argues that Calvin and the people of Geneva saw their city as offering “a holy commonwealth.”<sup>365</sup> In other words, that city was meant to model what it meant for God’s people to be part of a community of believers together, seeking to worship God, to steward creation and to seek one another’s welfare.

I believe therefore that Christians in the city shouldn’t just be seeking to share the good news with individuals but rather to go beyond that to grow urban communities that model what it means to be part of a community where Christ is at the centre. This is in order to offer a foretaste of what is to come when the new Jerusalem is fully revealed.

Now, let me be clear about what I mean by that. First of all, what I don’t mean is that we are offering a kind of social gospel alongside or instead of the gospel of salvation. This means that I’m not arguing for an idealistic possibility. Christians and the church cannot and should not expect to be able to solve all the problems of the city. Nor do I see social action as a means to win people over to the Gospel. This risks being seen as disingenuous with handouts regarded as bribes.

Rather, my view is that as we lead people to Christ and disciple them that a natural outworking of that will be that they become part of a new and alternative community that bears witness to the transforming power of God through the Gospel and offers that little foretaste of what is to come. Further, it is my view that even when people do not come to faith, even the most minimal of contacts with Christ and the Gospel, a brush against the hem of his garment, will affect people and

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<sup>363</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 55.

<sup>364</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 57.

<sup>365</sup> Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 63.

communities in some way. I therefore expect the church to model what it is like to be a Christ-centred community and for there to be an overflow of common grace from the church to wider society.

What does this look like in practice? Well, I hope this isn't a cop-out, but I think that the detail is something that you have to work out in your context. However, to avoid a total cop-out, I think we can talk in big picture terms and we can offer some examples of possibilities.

The principles are those we find described in the New Testament. So, the church should function like an extended household. Indeed, I would argue that this is what the city is meant to be at its best. This means that believers will recognise that they are connected to the body with their different gifts to bring; they do not live in isolated individualism. It means that there will be a submitting to one another and preferring of each other's needs. This means that churches will be communities where people are able to flourish and to be valued for who they are and what they bring. Churches will be places where people are not allowed to be lazy and entitled but where those who have genuine needs find that they are looked after and their needs are met but where at the same time, they are encouraged to contribute into the community as well.

In a lot of cases, this will mean that the church actually creates the community because often in urban populations, we find that there are large swathes of housing, but that is not the same as the conurbation being a city because there is no community, there is no gathered purpose, there isn't anything that models or enables the common good. When I was pastor at Bearwood Chapel, we were based on a busy high street. There were aspects of community life there. However, it was patchy. One of the things that we did was to create opportunities for community celebration, mini festivals and street festivals if you like. The first was a "Street Party" based on the chapel site to celebrate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. We ran events through the day with games, music, puppets, face paints etc. and allowed local people to set up little street stalls with arts and crafts. At the centre of the day was the Gospel, including a point where I gave a short message and prayed. We had Gospels available for people to take too. We weren't sure how many would turn up and so were overwhelmed when we began to lose count around the 800-mark. I remember sitting next to a lady in her 80s from the church as she asked, "Who are all these people?" I responded, "these are our neighbours." As well as beginning to build that local community and introducing people to us, it also introduced our church to the community and helped build a vision to reach it. Increasingly I became akin to the old-fashioned parish priest being out and about meeting people in the street and visiting their homes.

The point is this. Communities need to celebrate together and to mourn together. A community has a shared remembrance, so we commemorate together. That's why we have festivals, fun days, thanksgivings, weddings, parties etc. It's also why we have funerals and one-minute silences. A church can create community by providing those opportunities. It may also do so by encouraging people to get involved in art and culture that reflects the context, whether that's music, rap, street dance, murals, graffiti, sculpture etc.

Now, in the South and West of Birmingham as well as into much of the Black Country, you at least have the physical structures that give shape to a community in places usually centred around local village and town highstreets as those towns and villages have merged into the conurbation. That is not always the case. In North Birmingham, there are huge estates of houses and occasional shopping precincts, but no real centre points to specific communities. This will be true of many urban populations. In such cases, you have to work even harder at creating the community. The community may then begin to centre in upon the church building or its rented space, a local school,

a community centre or even a few houses on the street where Christians live and open up their lives to share with others.

Indeed, that last point is crucial. I believe that we begin to build a community simply by sharing our lives with others, by living life together as part of a church family and inviting the neighbours around to join in. So, at its smallest and most basic level, we practice hospitality. We make it clear that our homes are open. We find opportunities to talk with others, to offer them food and drink, to do things with them.

We have to be aware of specific cultural norms here. I frequently mention that when I was growing up in West Yorkshire, the culture there was one where people were naturally in and out of one another's homes – no appointment necessary. I then lived in Kent and didn't even get to know my neighbour's name. My wife, from the South East, was shocked at the idea when we were up in Bradford that we could just drop in on some people I knew from childhood unplanned and unannounced. When we moved to the Black Country, we found that people were friendly and we quickly became friends with our neighbours on the cul-de-sac, but everything happened on the front doorstep or out in the street. Black Country people are more cautious about going in and out of each other's houses. Those spaces remain private. However, during the COVID pandemic, a neighbour began wheeling out his recycling bin to the gate when the rule of six came in with a pack of beer on top. He would stop anyone passing and invite them to have a drink. Gradually, a cluster of people formed. He did this every Saturday and that evolved into barbeques and takeaways in one another's gardens. So you have to find where the acceptable space is for people to meet each other and share life.

How do we look out for one another? Various things have been attempted by Christians over the years, from debt advice through to foodbanks. I would say two things here. First of all, that the best responses to need arise naturally out of the congregation rather than through national charities. Secondly, we want this to be about community and not about charity, definitely not about the church coming in to fix things for the working classes or for ethnic minority groups as white saviours. For that reason, I'm not a fan of foodbanks where people queue for vouchers and then go somewhere else to queue for handouts. However, I think there are other innovative options available which can enable people to receive what they need and contribute what and when they can.

Additionally, churches can provide opportunities to help people to contribute back into the community by serving in different ways. This means that even if they are not receiving a wage directly for their work, there is a sense that they are workers contributing something in, rather than simply the recipients of handouts.

So, a church planted into an urban context can start to build a community in a manner that points forward to the hope that we have. The local church does that as it develops a culture of grace rich welcome and hospitality. It does this as it gives the community opportunity to celebrate and remember and as it provides opportunities for art to thrive. Finally, it builds community as it models and encourages a life together where people contribute and look out for each other.

## 12 Messy Church

A few years back, I discovered to my disappointment that the label I wanted to apply to our experience of church life had already been taken. If you hear the term “Messy Church,” you are likely to associate it with an all-age event, aimed at children but including their parents with craft, Bible stories, games and food. Actually, most “Messy Church” events end up being very tidy, ordered and middle class if we are honest.

If it hadn't already been taken, I would have used it to describe the experience many of us have when we get involved in inner city and estate outreach. Now, often the reality is that our buildings end up chaotic and messy. Sometimes too our church services. If you like things ordered, structured and on time, then you might find urban church a challenge. You might have to engage with different cultural approaches to time. For example, whilst British middle-class types are not brilliant at time keeping, they see it as important. So, if you don't make it for the start of the service, you are likely to sneak in quietly so as not to disturb everyone. Preaching to a Latino congregation on the other hand and you may be interrupted a few times by people not only coming in but taking their time to enthusiastically greet and be greeted by everyone else.

However, I'm talking here more about messy faith. We need to be ready for people to turn up with all of the complicated, troublesome, unfinished stuff that's going on in their lives. If, as I've argued previously, we are modelling the hope we have of a future, better city, then living in the now and the not yet means living with that tension.

First of all, it means that we need to start from the perspective that it is God who decides who comes in and how they come in. We look for his verdict on people's lives. I remember a lady coming along to our chapel. She'd started coming with a friend through perhaps one of the most unorthodox evangelistic methods. Her friend had made an appointment to see me very early in my pastoral ministry and had brought her unbelieving friend along as her chaperone. Her friend sat in and listened as the person unburdened themselves about all the challenges and problems in the church. On the way out, she told me that she'd felt at peace all the time she'd been in the building. This was important as she struggled badly with anxiety and depression.

So, she started coming along. Then, one day after the service, she came to speak to me. She wanted to know what the church thought of her and her situation. There was a lot going on behind **that** because her life was a mess, but at that stage her main concern was that she had lived with her partner for many years without worrying about marriage. My response was that far more important than what the church thought of her was what God thought of her. The church would have to get in line with his verdict. I left her with a booklet called “Two Ways to Live” and off she went. A week later, she came back and said, “I prayed the prayer at the end of the book.” She was so happy.

Now, that's not to say that the mess in her life didn't need sorting out and that there weren't major issues to work through. However, what it meant was that she was welcomed on the basis of grace. Romans 8 is clear that in Christ we are forgiven, not condemned, and that therefore Jesus does not condemn us. If he does not condemn you, then no-one has the right to. It meant that she was a work in progress. We needed to allow God to work in His time. That meant we needed to learn to see and trust what God was doing.

Mez McConnell in his book “Church in Hard Places” tells the following story from his days as a missionary in Brazil:

We must do a lot of hard work in explaining true, biblical repentance when working with the poor (or anybody for that matter). Being sorry and repenting for sins are two completely different acts that produce two very different long-term fruits in people's lives. Sin is grievous to God, separating us from him. Repentance is a turning away from that sin. The difficulty pastorally comes in the fact that repentance can look very different when dealing with broken and chaotic lives.

Take Innocencia, a thirteen-year-old street girl from northern Brazil. She had lived on the streets for most of her short life. Her parents abandoned her at five years old, and from the age of six onward she sold her body for sex to pay for food and to feed her glue habit. When we found her, she was in a mess. One of her arms had been crippled from a beating she took on the streets from a john, all of her teeth were missing, and she had been raped countless times. One day, when she heard the life-transforming truth about God, her sinful position before him, and the good news of what Jesus had done, she wanted to repent on the spot. We prayed with her and trusted that she had made a genuine profession of faith.

Several days later we found Innocencia barely conscious in the streets, a bag of industrial-strength glue at her feet (incidentally, this glue is a far deadlier poison than heroin.) My Brazilian team was devastated and angry; her repentance had seemed so genuine!

We got her to her feet, cleaned her up at our center, and spoke to her about the commitment she had made to Christ. "Oh, Pastor Mez," she said, "I do love Jesus. I have turned from my sin. Last night I turned a client down, and I am now only doing six bags a day instead of ten." She beamed at me with pride, and I felt chastened. Was I really expecting that she'd be a finished product on day one of conversion?<sup>366</sup>

See here a firm commitment to the power of the Gospel and clarity about sin and repentance, but that clarity also includes a willingness to trust God's work happening at his pace and in his way. Mez is now involved in church planting on Scottish council estates (schemes). He goes on to observe,

Repentance in the schemes of Scotland is not dissimilar, although not often as extreme. How about the man who comes to Christ, has three children by two different women, and wants to turn from his sinful, abusive past and be a proper father to his children? What does repentance look like for him? Well, one way or the other, it's not going to be simple and clean. For people in messy situations, repentance is going to involve making hard decisions and dealing with the consequences of a selfish and sinful lifestyle.<sup>367</sup>

Are we ready to show that kind of patience? If so, it will mean that we will be alert and realistic to what is going on with discipleship. This means that whenever people meet me, I'm cautious about hearing their stories. I don't expect to hear the whole truth at the start. In fact, I'm often convinced that they don't know what is truth and what is fiction. My approach is that I'd rather start out assuming the worst and stick with a person than start out optimistic and then give up on them when the truth comes out. Now, we have to be careful that this does not become or look like cynicism because it can easily do that, but cynicism and faith-driven realism are two different things. Let me give you another example.

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<sup>366</sup> McConnell, Mez; McKinley, Mike. "Church in Hard Places" (9Marks.) Crossway. Kindle Edition. Location 552-565.

<sup>367</sup> McConnell, Mez; McKinley, Mike. "Church in Hard Places" (9Marks.) Crossway. Kindle Edition. Location 565.

We had a young man who started attending church. At the time, we had an OM team with us and I'm not sure how much the presence of several young ladies in their twenties had in encouraging his desire to come to church, but he came along regularly. People began to look out for him and he was invited to home groups and things. He got some practical help too.

Then one day I got an angry and distressed call. A member of the church had lent him a large sum of money which he said he needed. However, as soon as he was given it, even within their earshot, he was on the phone to his dealer to buy a large amount of drugs. The member was angry. "He has broken our trust," they told me. However, I argued that he had not broken our trust. He had done exactly what we could reasonably trust him to do if put in that situation. It's that kind of perspective that allows us to persevere knowing that it is only God that can change a sinner's heart and therefore, we have to trust God's timing.

This means that church will be messy, chaotic even, and urban church planting and pastoring will not be an easy ride. It means being ready for joy and disappointment, ups and downs, twists and turns in the many life stories you get to have a walk-on part in.

This kind of messiness isn't for everyone. Some will be at a stage in life where everything going on and everything that has happened means that they need much more structure, order and tidiness. They need that safety within the church. That's okay as long as they don't insist that any and every church must provide it for them.

We live with the mess because when we were called to this mission, we were called to step into the very mess we are discovering. That's what urban subversive fulfilment is all about. It's possible because we have a saviour who stepped down into the mess of our world at Calvary and there was a point when he stepped down into the mess of our lives too.

### 13 Conclusion

At the beginning of this book, I described the need for a Gospel vision to reach our inner city and council estate contexts.<sup>368</sup> I write primarily in and to a UK context but I believe that much of what I've said has relevance to other countries. Around the world, cities and large urban areas are where we tend to find most people.

When thinking about urban outreach, it is important to distinguish this need from some initiatives to "reach the city." Even within urban and city contexts there is at times a narrow focus on those areas that benefit from levels of prosperity around student and graduate populations as well as city centres that have benefited from gentrification. There is still a huge gap when it comes to mission focus on other parts of cities, especially those with poorer communities, working class contexts and multi-ethnic neighbourhoods with high levels of immigration.

I've argued that as we seek to reach our cities that the work of missiologists such as JH Bavinck, Hendrick Kramer and more recently Dan Strange might be helpful in pointing us towards a "subversive fulfilment" approach to reaching our cities. Whilst there is much need, darkness and idolatry in our cities, we can also see the hopes and dreams that people have and point them to Christ as the one that reorientates their hopes towards God and offers true, lasting fulfilment.

This offers us a methodology for reaching estates and inner-city neighbourhoods where we are invited to Step In, Search out, Show Up and Show Off. We might describe this as an incarnational type approach to mission. The primary need is for people willing to move into places where there are no or few believers and begin to share their lives and their faiths with their neighbours. Conventional methods of church planting that depend on a large number of people moving from one church to start another are unlikely to work. A pioneer approach with small numbers (even 2-4) of planters going into an area offers flexibility and the possibility of long-term fruit.

This type of mission will require long-term patience and the ability to build up relationships. It will need people with open eyes and ears able to recognise, understand and describe the cultures in which they find themselves whether that's a white working class, south Asian Islamic, Caribbean or Punjabi Sikh context.

In the end, the great need is for workers in the Harvest field. If you have already responded to a call to this particular field then I hope you have found this book helpful in equipping you for the work. It may be that others have read more out of curiosity but could God be calling you to serve in the urban harvest field, sharing the good news with many needy people?

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<sup>368</sup> Council Estate is the term used in English contexts to describe areas of social housing normally owned and rented out by local authorities or other agencies such as housing associations. Many of these estates were built either between and just after the First and Second World Wars. These are sometimes referred to as "Schemes" in Scotland and are the equivalent of US Projects.

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