Hope for the City

Part 2

Searching Out

(An Urban Subversive Fulfilment)

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?"[1]

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.[2]

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.[3]

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.[4] 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.[5] 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.[6]

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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[1] Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 88.
[2] Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 178.
[3] Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (WBC 1. Word, 1987), 283.
[4] See Numbers 13 and Joshua 2.
[5] Numbers 13:17-20.
[6] 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.[7]

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)."[8]

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."[9]

Finally, we see that Paul's response to the idolatry is anger.[10] This is the same anger that God shares at idolatry(Is 65:3; Hos 8:5)."[11] 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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[7] Peterson, *Acts*, 487.
[8] David G Peterson, *The Acts of the Apostles* (The Pillar New Testament Commentary. Nottingham: Apollos, 2009) 487.
[9] Peterson, *Acts*, 487.
[10] Block, *Acts*, 560.
[11] Block, *Acts*, 560.

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."[12] 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."[13] 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.[14] 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%.[15]

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[12] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smethwick accessed 07/08/2018
[13] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smethwick accessed 07/08/2018
[14] https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/
[15] 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.

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."[16]

David Smith cites Cox's comment on the extent of 20th 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?[17]

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."[18]

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.

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:[19]

> "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)."[20]

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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[16] Cox, cited in Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 17.
[17] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 17.
[18] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 18.
[19] 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.
[20] 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)."[21]

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."[22]

This links to contemporary sociological/political views of cities as places for the benefit of minorities to oppress majority.[23] 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."[24]

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.'"[25] In their opinion, this is a significant cause of the tension that city dwellers experience.[26] 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."[27]

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."[28]

Secondly, tension is experienced simply through the pace, intensity and business of city life.[29] 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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[21] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 49.
[22] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 19.
[23] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 19.
[24] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 30.
[25] Allen, Massey & Pryke, "Introduction: Unsettling Cities," 3.
[26] Allen, Massey & Pryke, "Introduction: Unsettling Cities," 3.
[27] Allen, Massey & Pryke, "Introduction: Unsettling Cities," 3.
[28] Allen, Massey & Pryke, "Introduction: Unsettling Cities," 3-4.
[29] 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."[30]

On the other hand, there has also been a strong historical emphasises on the positive theology associated with the move from Eden to "New Jerusalem."[31] 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."[32]

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."[33] 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."[34]

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."[35]

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."[36]

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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[30] Allen, Massey & Pryke, "Introduction: Unsettling Cities," 2.
[31] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 23.
[32] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 24.
[33] Allen, Massey & Pryke, "Introduction: Unsettling Cities," 1.
[34] Allen, Massey & Pryke, "Introduction: Unsettling Cities," 1.
[35] Allen, Massey & Pryke, "Introduction: Unsettling Cities," 2.
[36] 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."[37]

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'."[38]

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."[39]

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.[40] 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.[41]

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.[42] 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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[37] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 40.
[38] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 52.
[39] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 53.
[40] Provide references to Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and relevant commentaries. See e.g. Jeremiah 5 and Ezekiel 16.
[41] C.f. Ezekiel 1 and Ezekiel 10.
[42] 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.[43] 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?"[44]

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.[45]

> "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."[46]

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."[47]

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.[48] 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.[49]

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."[50] Fascinatingly, he observes that, alongside the Christian development of cities,

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[43]Hebrews 11:8-9.
[44] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 53. C.f. Hebrews 11:10.
[45] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 57.
[46] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 57.
[47] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 55.
[48] Revelation 17:9; Revelation 18. Acts25:9-12; Acts 27:23-24 & Romans 1:8-10.
[49] Revelation 17:15-18 & Revelation 18.
[50] 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."[51]

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.[52]

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. [53] 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."

[51] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 59.
[52] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 67.
[53] 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.

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 Allem, 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."[54]

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.[55]

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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[54] Allen, Massey & Pryke, "Introduction: Unsettling Cities," 1.
[55] 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,"[56]

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."[57]

The result is that, "some have suggested that public spaces are being re-engineered as places of surveillance from which threatening groups are excluded."[58]

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.[59] This starts from an early age with 5500 sexual assaults in schools reported every year.[60] McDonnell argues that this creates a culture where women are seen as dependent on men for status and safety.[61] 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."[62]

It is this sense of an informal curfew which has led to university student unions running "Reclaim the Night" campaigns.[63]

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.[64] 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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[56] Amin & Graham, "Cities of Connection and Disconnection," 16.
[57] Amin & Graham, "Cities of Connection and Disconnection," 16.
[58] Amin & Graham, "Cities of Connection and Disconnection," 16.
[59] Linda McDonnell, "City life and difference: negotiating diversity", 95-136 in *Unsettling Cities* (Ed John Allen, Doreen Massey and Michael Pryke. London: Routledge, 1998).
[60] http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-6054355/Schoolboy-rapists-think-girls-crying-foreplay.html
[61] McDonnell, "City life and difference: negotiating diversity," 105.
[62] McDonnell, "City life and difference: negotiating diversity," 105.
[63] McDonnell, "City life and difference: negotiating diversity," 105.
[64] 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."[65]

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"[66] with 26.6% being of Asian origin and 9% Black. In neighbouring Leicester, the figures are 45.1% British and 37.1% Asian[67] whilst in my home city, Bradford, 63.9% are White British and 26.8% from an Asian background.[68] 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.[69]

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 20th 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 in1966 which submerged large parts of the Mirpur district, emigration from that area accelerated."[70]

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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[65] Smith, *Seeking a City with Foundations*, 219.
[66] https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?compare=1946157186
[67] https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?compare=1946157130
[68] https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?compare=1946157124
[69] https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/localarea?compare=1946157186
[70] 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."[71]

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."[72]

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."[73]

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."[74]

The link to "The Commonwealth" and to British trade in the 19th 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 26th 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

[71] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43782241 accessed 13-08-2018
[72] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43782241 accessed 13-08-2018
[73] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_Pakistanis accessed 13-08-2018.
[74] 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."[75]

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."[76]

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."[77]

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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[75] https://www.davidlammy.co.uk/single-post/2018/05/29/Speeches-on-the-Windrush-crisis-in-Parliament accessed 13-08-2018.

[76] W. Douglas Evans, *My Lord, My Rock, My Life* (Carnforth, Lancs.: ECC Publications, 1993), 84-85.

[77] 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."[78]

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."[79]

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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[78] John Piper, *Bloodlines, Race, Cross and The Christian* (Wheaton IL.: Crossway, 2011), 34.

[79] 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.[80]

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."[81]

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."[82]

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."[83]

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. Varaidzo 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."[84]

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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[80] Shelagh Delaney, *A Taste of Honey* (1959. Repr. Metheuen Student edition. London: Methuen Publishing Limited, 1982), 86.
[81] Variadzo, "A guide to being black," 10.
[82] Variadzo, "A guide to being black," 10.
[83] Variadzo, "A guide to being black," 12.
[84] 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."[85]

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."[86]

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.[87]

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.

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…"[88] 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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[85] Nikesh Shuklah, "Namaste" Pages 1-9 in *The Good Immigrant* (Ed Nikesh Shuklah. London: Unbound, 2016), 1.
[86] Shuklah, "Namaste," 1.
[87] Shuklah, "Namaste," 7.
[88] 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"[89]

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."[90]

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."[91]

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."[92]

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."[93]

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

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[89] https://twitter.com/spudgunpreacher/status/1027997866546094080
[90] https://twitter.com/Windy_London/status/1028075771078864897
[91] https://twitter.com/revandyprime/status/1027986800864894976
[92] https://twitter.com/kouya/status/1028182681400619008 accessed 16-08-2018
[93] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st 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."[94]

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."[95]

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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[94] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st 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 21st 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 21st Century*, 11-12. This meant that the survey had to be supplemented with other forms of research. Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 11-12.

[95] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st 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."[96]

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." [97]

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 canconservative politicians trying to appeal to the middle and upper classes."[98]

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."[99]

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 party 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

[96] Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 174.
[97] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 6.
[98] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 26.
[99] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 29-30.

> surgery, where you're dealing with people on a Friday night and Saturday morning with their problems."[100]

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."[101]

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

[100] Owen Jones, *Chav,* 82.
[101] 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."[102]

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.[103]

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)."[104]

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":[105]

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.[106]

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

[102] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 26.
[103] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 40.
[104] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 4.
[105] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 6.
[106] See Fig 7.2. Savage, *Social Class in the 21st 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."[107]

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."[108]

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."[109]

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)."[110]

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

[107] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 45-46.
[108] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 44-45.
[109] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 49-50.
[110] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 75.

> live. A home is not just somewhere to lay your head; for the advantaged, it can also be a strategic investment choice."[111]

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.[112] 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."[113]

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.[114]

> "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."[115]

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
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> 25% - Technical Middle Class
>
> 10% - New Affluent Workers
>
> 10% - Traditional Working Class

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[111] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 78.
[112] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 95.
[113] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 97.
[114] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 115.
[115] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 115.

20% - Emerging Service Workers

>5% - Precariat[116]

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."[117]

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."[118]

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.

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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[116] Percentage of graduates per class. See Fig 7.2. Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 229.
[117] Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century*, 131.
[118] 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.[119]

> "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."[120]

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."[121] This was attempted by designing estates around green spaces in the hope that community would naturally form.[122]

> "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?"[123]

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."[124]

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."[125]

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."[126]

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[119] Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 8.
[120] 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.
[121] Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 138.
[122] Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 138.
[123] Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 138.
[124] Ravetz, *Council Housing and Culture*, 173.
[125] Lynsey Hanley, *Estates*, 18.
[126] 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."[127] 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."[128]

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."[129]

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."[130]

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.[131]

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

[127] Lynsey Hanley, *Estates*, 18.
[128] Lynsey Hanley, *Estates*, 5.
[129] Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 8.
[130] Lynsey Hanley, *Estates*, 5.
[131] 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."[132]

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."[133]

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.[134] 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."[135]

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."[136]

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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[132] Owen Jones, *Chavs,* 62.
[133] Linsey Hanley, *Estates*, 4.
[134] Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 20.
[135] Owen Jones, *Chavs*, 20-21.
[136] 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.

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."[137]

I think that his comment "We were Yorkshire" hits the nail on the lead. 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

[137] http://mardytomiddlin.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?" [138]

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.[139] 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."[140]

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."[141]

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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[138] See Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 131.
[139] Bavinck, *The Science of Missions*, 123.
[140] Strange, *For their Rock is not as our Rock*, 71.
[141] Strange, *For their Rock is not as our Rock*, 71.

is not as our Rock" for something called "Priscae Theologia" or "Original Revelation."[142] By this, he means,

> "a remnantal revelation of God disseminated and preserved universally in humanity but distorted and degenerated over time."[143]

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.

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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[142] Joseph Blenkinsopp, *The Pentateuch: An Introduction to the First Five Books of the Bible* (London: SCM, 1992), 108-114.
[143] 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 911. "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.[144]

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.[145] He identifies Muslim Modernizers, Muslim Traditionalists and Islamists:[146]

> "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."[147]

This grouping Includes secularized and cultural Muslims.[148]Riddell compares this with liberal Christianity's attempts to reconcile faith with modernism.

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[144] Peter G Riddell, *Christians and Muslims: Pressures and Potential in a post-9/11 world* (Leicester: IVP, 2004).
[145] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 18.
[146] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.
[147] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.
[148] 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."[149]

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."[150]

Tentatively, Riddell compares this with Evangelicalism in terms of Scriptural interpretation, although he recognises that "one must be wary of drawing facile comparisons."[151] 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."[152]

This majority includes those who want to "blend in and assimilate" with British Culture.[153] 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."[154]

Participations also include those who want to "participate and influence society."[155] 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."[156]

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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[149] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.
[150] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.
[151] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 19.
[152] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 61.
[153] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims*, 61.
[154] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims, 62.*
[155] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims, 62.*
[156] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims, 62.*

countries."[157] The former includes those who are campaigning for the right to follow shari'a law in the UK.[158]

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.

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.[159] The Home Office aims to make a decision within 6 months.[160] 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.[161] 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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[157] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims, 62.*
[158] Riddell, *Christians and Muslims, 62.*
[159] https://www.gov.uk/claim-asylum accessed 29/08/2018.
[160] https://www.gov.uk/claim-asylum accessed 29/08/2018.
[161] 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.

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."[162] "Their experience of the State is likely to be either that of threat or an unwieldy bureaucracy."[163]
2. "Entitlement mentality."[164] "The benefit system has created many people who are used to others providing for them."[165]
3. "Reputation" – where do you sit in the social hierarchy?[166]
4. "The struggle"[167] "It's not just that life is hard, but the fact of struggling forms part of their identity."[168]
5. "Victim mentality"[169] 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."[170]
6. "Limited aspirations."[171]

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[162] Chester, *Unreached*, 46.
[163] Chester, *Unreached*, 46. -
[164] Chester, *Unreached*, 47.
[165] Chester, *Unreached*, 47.
[166] Chester, *Unreached*, 47.
[167] Chester, *Unreached*, 47.
[168] Chester, *Unreached*, 47.
[169] Chester, *Unreached*, 48.
[170] Chester, *Unreached*, 48.
[171] Chester, *Unreached*, 48.

7. “Relational assets:” community and friendship matter. [172]
8. “Non-abstract, concrete thinking.”[173]
9. “Non-diarized relational lifestyles.”[174] “‘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.’”[175]

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.”[176]

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 to 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 though 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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[172] Chester, *Unreached*, 49.
[173] Chester, *Unreached*, 50.
[174] Chester, *Unreached*, 50.
[175] Chester, *Unreached*, 51.
[176] Chester, *Unreached*, 90.

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."[177]

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.

[177] Jeremiah 2:13.