

# Renew

## **“Gospel Renewal & The City”**

**Jeremiah 29:4-14**

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on October 16, 2016

### INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Please open your Bible to Jeremiah 29.
- We are taking two months this fall to unpack our proposed five-year vision and plan. Our proposed vision is that we want to be a church that is **(SHOW SLIDE)** *“renewing our community through the gospel.”*
  - Renewal assumes that something has been ruined or broken but is being made new. Christianity says that underneath all our problems - from ISIS, to poverty, to our own anger and selfishness - is the fact that our world has been broken by sin. Things aren't the way they're supposed to be.
    - But this word “gospel” means good news. Christianity is the good news of what God has done, is doing, and will do through Jesus Christ to renew all things to the way they're supposed to be.
- When we refer “our community” in the vision statement we mean first of all ourselves, second our city, and thirdly those parts of the world where Central has influence.
  - Today I want to talk about how the gospel renews our city. When we speak of the city of Victoria, we mean the entire CRD, not just the neighbourhood surrounding our church building.
    - So today we are asking how we bring gospel renewal to our city of Victoria? The answer has everything to do with how we, as Christians, relate to the city.
- This morning I want to answer this question in three parts.
  - First, we will talk about how we should *not* relate to the city. Second, how we *should* relate to the city. And then finally, how we get the right heart to relate to the city.

### HOW WE SHOULD NOT RELATE TO THE CITY

- Let's begin then by talking about **(SHOW SLIDE)** how we *should not* relate to the city.
  - To understand what is happening in our passage of Scripture today we need to know the backstory. In 597 B.C. the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar conquered the city of Jerusalem. He took all the Jewish cultural elites – the leaders, the craftsmen, the artisans – back to Babylon.
    - Anyone who knows their history knows that Babylon is one of the greatest urban centres in ancient world. Babylon also becomes synonymous with pride and all that is opposed to God.
- Now the question is, **“how should God's exiled people relate to this great big wicked city that has just conquered them?”** What we see here is that there were two different groups who gave differing views on how the Jews should relate to the city.
  - Let's look at these competing ways of relating to the city and then I will show you that, in his letter to the exiles, God rejects both of these.

### ASSIMILATION TO THE CITY

- The first group was the Babylonians. They had a clear agenda for how they wanted the Jews to relate to their city. The Babylonians were a smart people. When they conquered other nations they did not seek to expel the people they just conquered. That does not work because those people just go away really angry, build an army, make alliances with other nations, and soon you are at war again.
  - The Babylonians were also very smart in that they did not seek to subjugate the people they conquered by making them into slaves. Totalitarian nations do not ultimately work because citizens will only put up with so much. Eventually the people revolt.

- So the Babylonians took a third tactic. They did not expel or subjugate. They simply assimilated those they conquered into their own culture. They said, ***“We will not kill you. In fact, we will give you total freedom. You can live with us, have the best jobs, and take whatever you want from the city as long as you become like us.”***
  - We see this for instance with Daniel. He was one of these cultural elites exiled in Babylon. The king gave him and others a Babylonian liberal arts education. This is a great tactic because for the sake of money, power, and comfort people will give up their identity and distinctives. Within a few generations they are assimilated. To assimilate then means to use the city for your own power, your own enjoyment, and your own wealth by becoming like the city.
    - You see this in verse 6. **READ 6b** – ***“multiply there, and do not decrease.”*** The Babylonians wanted them to stop having kids so they could be assimilated. But God says, ***“No, that is not the way.”*** **(SHOW SLIDE)** God’s people are not to assimilate to the city.

## ISOLATION FROM THE CITY

- There was another group that called for an opposite way to relate to the city. They were against assimilating. They called not for assimilation but for isolation.
  - Turn back to Jeremiah 28. Here we find prophets in Israel like Hananiah. Look at what he says in verse 11. **READ 11** - ***“Even so will I break the yoke of Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon from the neck of all the nations within two years.”***
- So Hananiah was saying that very soon God was going to judge this wicked city and destroy it, which would allow the exiles to return home to their city of Jerusalem. And so as Israel sat camped outside of Babylon the message was clear: ***“Do not go into that wicked city. God is going to destroy it soon so don’t engage. Their values are not ours. We will build our own communities and create our own schools. We will relate to the city only in so far as we can make money from it and use it for our own purposes.”***
  - But we see here that **(SHOW SLIDE)** God’s people are not to isolate from the city. Look at the letter in chapter 29. Look at verse 8-9. **READ 8-9** - ***“For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Do not let your prophets and your diviners who are among you deceive you, and do not listen to the dreams that they dream, for it is a lie that they are prophesying to you in my name; I did not send them, declares the LORD.”***
- So, to paraphrase Tim Keller whom I am borrowing some thoughts from today, **(SHOW SLIDE)** assimilations means that I go into the city and relate to it in order to build up my own wealth and comfort by becoming like the city. Isolation is where I smile on the outside but on the inside I disdain the city and only deal with it to the degree that it helps me, my family, and my group.
  - The prophets said, ***“Don’t move into the city. It’s wicked. Just use it.”*** The Babylonians said, ***“No come on in. Get great jobs, take on our values, and use the city for your own comfort and pleasure.”***
    - God is against both of these ways of relating to the city.

## HOW WE SHOULD RELATE TO THE CITY

- So that brings us to the second part of the message: **(SHOW SLIDE)** how we *should* relate to the city.
  - The exiles would have been shocked to read God’s letter to them through Jeremiah. Notice that God says three things about how they should relate to the city.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** First, God’s people rightly relate to the city when they recognize God’s sovereign hand in where they live.
  - Notice that over and over again God says it is he who carried them to exile in Babylon. Look at verse 4 for instance. **READ 4** - ***“Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon.”***
    - God is saying, ***“It’s part of my plan that you lose your cultural and religious power and***

*live as exiles in this city.” God is saying, “It is part of my plan to renew you and transform you. It is also part of my plan to renew and transform the city.”*

- So often I hear Christians bemoaning the increasing secularization of our nation: *“There is no more prayer in schools and the Christian voice is often marginalized. In the past most people accepted Judeo-Christian values, but not today.”* But listen, in Acts 17 we read that *“[God] made every nation of men...and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.”*
  - It is not an accident that you were born in this generation, that you live in this city, and live in the exact neighbourhood you do. God is saying to us, *“Stop this defeatist mentality that longs for the good old days. I am in charge. I took away your cultural power. But I am calling to live in this great city of Victoria because I have plans to renew you and to renew this city.”* Recognize God’s sovereign hand in where you live.
- **(SHOW SLIDE)** Second, God’s people rightly relate to the city when they love both God and the city (not just one or the other). We see that God absolutely denies that his people have to choose between assimilation and isolation.
  - Notice, on the one hand, that God refuses to let his people assimilate and take on all the values of the city. They are to increase in number, not decrease. That is to say, *“Do not lose your identity. Don’t become like the city. Remember who you are as my people.”*
  - And yet on the other hand God does not allow his people to isolate themselves from the city. Look at verse 5. **READ 5-6** - *“Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease.”*
    - So notice that they are not to stay outside the city. They are to move in. They are to build houses in the city, which means you are part of the economy. You live next to people who are not like you in religious beliefs. God’s people are not to be some weird group living on a commune. We are to do normal things like marry, have kids, and raise families within the city.
- In 2010 *The Financial Times* released a study entitled “The Future of Cities.” The report shows how in 1800 only 3% of the world lived in cities. By 1900 it was 14%. By the year 2000 it was 50%. The exponential curve continues. It is estimated that by the year 2050 80% of the world population will live in cities.
  - And yet the Christian response has largely been to abandon the city and move to the rural areas. 45% of Canadians live in just 6 cities. 16.5 million people live in Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton, Montreal, Ottawa/Gatineau, and Toronto. Why is it then that most Christians are in the rural areas?
    - There may be reasons to move to the rural areas but when we consider how many people live in cities and the strategic place of cities in shaping the world how can we do this? There may be reasons but they must not be because we are trying to escape the difficulties and sins of the city. God called his people to move into the city.
      - It is a false choice that Christians have to assimilate or isolate – to love God or love the city. God says, *“I want both. Love me by keeping your identity and love the city by living in it and engaging every part of it.”*
- So what does it practically look like to love God and love the city? **(SHOW SLIDE)** Finally, and this one was utterly shocking to the Jews and to many Christians today, God’s people rightly relate to the city when they sacrificially use their lives to benefit the common good (not just using the city for their own pleasure, wealth building, education...etc)
  - Look at verse 7. **READ 7** – *“But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”*

- The word for peace is the Hebrew word “shalom.” God’s people are to seek the shalom of the city. The English word peace simply does not capture shalom. Shalom means complete well-being in every aspect of life. It means wholeness.
- This is staggering. God is saying, ***“I don’t want you to just go in and build houses and use the city for your own pleasure, career advancement, education, or wealth building. I want you to roll up your sleeves and get to work making the city great. I want you to figure out where there is brokenness and suffering and I want you to do something about it. I want you to pray for this city and I want you to work for this city. In short, I want you to sacrificially love the city.”***
- You see the good news of Jesus Christ is not just about getting individual souls to heaven. It is about the renewal of all things and that renewal begins in this life.
  - This is why we made our second objective to be known for seeking the common good of the city. We want to be a church that is known for seeking the welfare of the city, not a church that hides within its walls or a church that just shouts at how bad the city is.
    - This is why we emphasize both our word and our deed ministries. We want to clearly speak the gospel but this must be complemented by actions of love and care for our city.
- As Christians we are called to love the city. We are to seek its shalom. We don’t use the city just for what it can give us. We give ourselves to the city. Christians are to be the very best citizens of the city.

## HOW WE GET THE RIGHT HEART TO RELATE TO THE CITY

- We have seen how we should not relate to the city and how we should relate to the city. But experience shows that this is easier said than done. So how do we live in this tension of loving God and also loving the city?
  - Let’s turn in the final place to talk about **(SHOW SLIDE)** how we get the right heart to relate to the city. Look again at verses 10-14. ***READ 10-14 - ““For thus says the LORD: When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will fulfill to you my promise and bring you back to this place. <sup>11</sup>For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. <sup>12</sup>Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. <sup>13</sup>You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. <sup>14</sup>I will be found by you, declares the LORD, and I will restore your fortunes and gather you from all the nations and all the places where I have driven you, declares the LORD, and I will bring you back to the place from which I sent you into exile.”***
- God says, ***“Although you are in exile, you are my people and I will not forsake you. My ultimate plan is bring you back to Jerusalem, the city of your God, where I will be with you and will prosper you.”***
  - This was partially fulfilled in that 70 years later God did bring his people back to Jerusalem. But this promise finds its ultimate fulfillment later on in the Bible’s grand story.
- Hebrews 11 speaks of God building a future city for his people so that it can even be said of Abraham that he ***“was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”*** Hebrews 13 says, ***“For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.”***
  - The entire Bible’s story ends in Revelation 21 and 22 with God renewing this earth and bringing his people into a city called ***“the New Jerusalem.”***
    - Throughout the New Testament God’s people are called “exiles” in this world. But God’s promise is that he has not forgotten his people and plans for their future good. When Jesus returns our exile in this world will end and God will bring us into the New Jerusalem. In God’s city all will be shalom for God will dwell with his people and ***“there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain.”***
- The good news of the Bible is that you and I can be welcomed into God’s eternal city. How? Through Jesus.

- In Hebrews 13 we read that, “*Jesus also suffered outside the city gate.*” To go outside the city meant to be forsaken. In other words, Jesus was cast out of God’s city of Jerusalem where God’s presence dwelled. He was cast out of the city and forsaken of God on the cross in order that we might be welcomed into God’s eternal city.
  - The good news of Christianity is that all who entrust themselves to Jesus, will have their sins forgiven and be welcomed into God’s eternal city. So in this life Christians are citizens of two cities – God’s city and the city we find ourselves in.
- So do you see how this gives us the right heart to correctly relate to the city? Tim Keller says this so well when he writes, **(SHOW SLIDE)** “*By his grace, Jesus lost the city-that-was, so we could become citizens of the city-to-come, making us salt and light in the city-that-is.*”<sup>1</sup>
  - On the one hand we don’t assimilate to the values of this earthly city because our identity is in the city to come. We shape all of our values around that city and its King – Jesus the risen Saviour.
    - And yet this does not mean that we become so heavenly minded that we isolate from our earthly cities and are therefore of no earthly good. To the contrary, we follow in the steps of our King. Jesus did not isolate himself from this sin-polluted world. No, he left heaven and came to earth. He took on human flesh and got right in with us. Even then Jesus did not live in a cabin on a lake isolated from the problems of humanity. He immersed himself in people’s needs. Everywhere he went Jesus sought the shalom of people. He healed their physical bodies. He provided for their food. He brought comfort.
      - And he did not disdain the city. As he looked over Jerusalem he wept for it and prayed for the city. And in the end he gave his very life for the city.
  - So we avoid assimilation and isolation when we remember that we are citizens of two cities – the future city of God and the present city we live in.
    - We are therefore called to be a city within the city. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “*You my people are the light of the world. You are a city set on a hill...let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.*”
      - Do you see it? How does Jesus say we live as this city within the city? By our good deeds. By seeking the shalom of the city. By not using the city just for our own comfort and pleasure but by giving our lives to make this city of Victoria a great city.
  - This is why we say our vision is to renew our city through the gospel. This is why our second major objective is to be known for seeking the common good of the city.

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller, *Center Church – Doing Balanced, Gospel Centered Ministry in your City*, 179.