JUSTICE AND POWER IN THE CITY



The length of time to become legal as a business in Lima is such that the majority of enterprises in the city remain illegal, part of the informal sector.

A. Introduction[[1]](#footnote--1)

1. The Commitment to Justice

The prophets declared God's concern for justice within society, and suggested that the people of God have a responsibility to enact justice in practical ways (Micah 6:8, Jer. 29:11). The move from Babylon to the new Jerusalem includes the establishment of justice within the city. Because injustice is physically structured into urban life, it cannot be ignored by urban missionaries.

2. Social Analysis

Any mission situation requires an understanding of the environment and what is happening, so that the word of God might be appropriately applied. The prophets reflect a deep understanding of the issues within their society. Jesus went into the Temple precincts where the moneychangers were, accurately locating the centre of religio-economic power in his society. It is necessary to understand the flow of power within a city if change is to be effective.

3. The Sin of Maintaining the Status Quo

Urban missionaries need to be wary of sustaining unjust systems by solely caring for their victims. The model of exodus suggests not simply a maintaining of people in their oppression, but a leading out of dependence into liberation.

4. People Group thinking will Not reach Cities

The church has been able to use its rural heritage to develop ministries to local neighbourhoods and suburbs, but has had little understanding of the processes which affect the city as a whole. Only strictly Compositional Viewpoints would deny that local urban issues are heavily influenced by the larger urban processes.

B. Urban Systems

The primary systems of a city are the economic, political and religious institutions. These systems constantly Interact with one another, thereby forming either holy alliances or an equally unholy trinity. These systems have the potential to work for justice and economic equality for the people and wise stewardship of a city's resources if their functioning is based on both corporate and Individual relationship with God. But systems can be demonic as well; enhancing economic privilege of a few while exploiting the poor and powerless, using the political order to further such exploitation while maintaining a city's order, turning faith commitment Into formal religion that legitimises "the powers that be" while benefiting from the powers' largess.[[2]](#footnote-0)

The city is a complex connection of processes and systems. Events which take place in a local community are influenced by forces at work within the city as a whole. The major systems of a city are economic, political and religious (where religion is understood in the broadest sense of the term as that which brings meaning). Other urban institutions such as education, policing, health, housing etc. are subsystems of these three central systems. It is through these systems that the structural injustice of the city is maintained and fostered. There is no way to address local situations of injustice without some understanding of and interaction with urban systems.

We cannot simply save individuals in the city and expect that the city will get saved. If the church does not deal with the systems and structures of evil in the city, then it will not effectively transform the lives of that city's individuals.



C. Corporate Evil

There is a consistent biblical recognition of the presence of sin and evil within entire communities and social groupings, as indicated by some of the following:

(a) The personal sin of Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 is echoed in Genesis 11 by the sin of the community, in the account of the tower of Babel. In both cases there is an attempt to outstretch the limits of humanity.

(b) When Achan sins in Joshua 7, God says 'Israel has sinned; they have transgressed my covenant.

(c) The prophets are concerned about the evil and injustice which has become ingrained in the community. They are calling the entire community to repentance and faith.

(d) In Matt 24:37-39, Jesus mourns over the city of Jerusalem, as a symbol of the whole Jewish religious and political system.

(e) Jesus suggests that the individual acts of healing and exorcism he performs are manifestations of a deeper power struggle between the kingdom of God and the forces of evil (Mt. 12:22-29).

(f) Paul picks up this theme and speaks of the victor of Jesus over spiritual powers:

For we are not contending against flesh and blood. but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly place (Ephesians 6:12).

(g) Perhaps the ultimate expression of the spiritual battle is expressed in the symbol of the beast and antichrist in the book of Revelation, where it appears that evil has taken structural and political form. It is as a result of our individualism that the church has by and large not responded to corporate evil. We don't have to look far to discover expressions of this phenomenon within our own world. Institutions, nations, companies and ideologies are all fertile breeding grounds for evil.

A city's evil is made up of personal aggrandisement, self-indulgence, social injustice, and idolatry. But such - while extremely grave - do not get at the heart of a city's sin... We are told that the first rule of warfare is to know the enemy. As long as we hold to an inadequate and naive understanding of a city's evil, we will never appreciate the full scope and power of the enemy we face. It is imperative that we have an adequate biblical understanding of the nature of urban evil. Only then can we, as God's people, hope to have any significant impact on that City.[[3]](#footnote-1)

1. Characteristics of Corporate Evil

i. Anonymity

Corporate Evil often has no discernible focus. Although an institution may perform actions of great evil, nobody takes responsibility. It is always "unfortunate but necessary". Individuals within the group disclaim responsibility for the activities of the group. Anonymity is an essential component of corporate or systemic evil, which always grows in the dark.

ii. Greater than the Sum of the Parts

Corporate evil is not simply the result of adding together the individual sin and evil of the participants. Rather the corporate body takes on a life of its own, and the evil is greater than the sum of the parts. It is not the individual people who are evil, often. They may have good intentions and be respectable people. Yet because the system is evil, they participate in acts of unspeakable evil while maintaining a clear conscience. The evil system feeds however on the darkness within human personality.

iii. Deeply Rooted

A sort of evil is deeply embedded in the life of the group or institution. It feeds on the life force of the structure, and therefore attacks on the evil within the system will usually be seen as an attack on the life of the system itself. It is possible to lop off branches without really changing the root of evil, and when this happens the evil always grows again, often with more strength and power.

iv. Remoteness

The centre of evil within a system is normally remote from the consequences of its actions. That way the individuals with the most power are cushioned from the full horror of their decisions. Victims of corporate evil are seldom face to face with the makers of policy who torment them; they thus feel oppressed by vague and nameless powers which bind their lives.

v. Control

Evil cannot stand another centre of power outside of itself. Because of this, evil structures are invariably hierarchical and authoritarian, and seek to control the lives of others. There is an unquenchable hunger for power in the belly of evil institutions. institutions.

vi. Idolatry

The evil structure is obsessed with its own survival and this often leads to claims for its own ultimacy. The institution demands subservience and blind allegiance from its component members. It adopts 'eternal life' through the notion of outliving its members. It offers salvation through total protection of the lives of its members. It has a 'faith" which is universal, and interprets all aspects of experience.

vii. Self-Destruction

Structural evil bears within it the seeds of its own destruction. It cannot help being evil, even if the consequences of its actions harm the structure itself. Often the hunger for power and greed mean that an evil system will consume the very source of its life, just as cancer kills its host body.

D. Confronting Evil Systems

In overcoming corporate evil, there is much to be learnt from the experience of the church in confronting evil within individuals. The vital truth to remember is that the Powers we are combating in the urban environment are 'the interiority of earthly institutions or structures or systems".[[4]](#footnote-2) This means that they must be addressed as the spiritual force which they are, but also confronted in the political form in which they occur.

1. Naming the Power

To name something is to recognise it, to make it concrete and identifiable, and so be able to respond to it. Evil retreats into the darkness because it knows that once it is recognised and named it is in danger. Naming the power within a structure involves praying, observing, and analysing the organisation. The centre of power needs to be identified, the lines of responsibility traced, and the consequences of the system's actions understood.

Caution needs to be exercised, because this is a power encounter. To speak the name of the power is to gain its instant attention, to call it from hiddeness to presence. Only a community is strong enough to confront corporate evil.

2. Exposing the Evil

Evil flourishes in the darkness. Naming the power is the first step in exposing evil to the light. The corporation or ideology must be publicly confronted with the results of its oppression. The decisions made in secret must be declared openly for all to hear. Information needs to be disseminated. Key figures in the organisation should be exposed and held accountable for what they are doing. Wherever possible oppressors should be faced with their victims and made to listen to them.

3. Engaging the Evil

Finally the dominating power within the system needs to be confronted and exorcised. The method of confrontation can never be that of human power alone. The corporate evil feeds on power, anger, hatred, bitterness. Therefore when those who attack it use these methods, they only make the evil stronger. The way to defeat evil is through humility, weakness, suffering and humour. As has been shown by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, but definitively through Christ, such methods expose and disarm evil. Against them evil has no defence.

Reality appears to be so constructed whether physically or spiritually, that every action creates an equal and opposite reaction. Thus every attempt to fight the Domination system by dominating means is destined to result in domination. When we resist evil with evil, when we mirror it, when we lash out at it in kind, we simply guarantee its perpetuation. The way of non-violence the way Jesus chose, is the only way that is able to overcome domination. To those trapped in the assumptions of domination, non-violence must appear suicidal - a crucifixion. But to those who have looked unflinchingly at the. record of violence in the everyday world, non-violence appears to be the only way left.[[5]](#footnote-3)

E. Power Centres and Decision Makers

The structured injustice of the city is revealed in factors such as: homelessness and luxury apartments, the 'redlining' of certain districts by insurance and investment companies, the availability of credit according to residential address, the quality of public services such as roading, health and education, and the unemployment levels of differing neighbourhoods. The mechanism which determines the quality of life of urban residents is that of land values. In a just world, it might be argued that price would be determined by the inherent quality of a commodity: i.e. that a section of similar size and access would cost the same wherever it may be located in the city. But price differentials form a very effective economic wall to keep undesirable elements out of particular geographical areas which are the domain of the wealthy. Such areas attract an inordinate proportion of services and power. This process is so well accepted as to appear 'natural', but it is instructive to analyse how it is supported.

1. The Power Players

i. Administration

Obviously cities are affected by national decision-making. A central government decision to close a port, transfer major government contracts, or cut health funding has major effects on cities. But most of the direct power within a city is held by local administration such as the city council. This body allocates planning zones, sets rating levels, and administers public services such as sewerage, water, transport and rubbish collection. In democratic societies, such local bodies are in theory representative, and freely elected. The reality is that world-wide, these centres of urban administrative power are dominated by the wealthy and powerful. There are a number of reasons for this. Often the position of Councillor is very low-paid for the hours required, and so suits people who have their own substantial income. Local body elections receive a low tum-out, and those who do vote tend toward the upper end of the socio-economic scale. The type of decision-making required supposedly suits managerial or business people. The wealthy have sufficient resources to fund extensive election campaigns. Effective power in the urban setting is thus exercised by an unrepresentative minority, and decisions not surprisingly reflect the bias of officeholders.

ii. Developers

A secondary source of power in the city comprises those who influence the decision-makers. A major source of revenue for local bodies is the rating return from commercial properties, particularly multi-storey high-rise buildings. Council often work in dose co-operation with developers, who provide such income. Ale developers in turn depend on favourable planning decisions for approval of their projects. Though councillors may have a statutory responsibility to work for the good of the city as a whole, their symbiotic relationship with developers is demonstrated in their decisions. It is highly unusual for developers to express a social conscience, unless it happens to coincide with a profit-making venture. The flow of information between administration and developers leads to highly profitable speculation, but can also mean the disruption of entire communities.

iii. Business Leaders

Another related centre of influence within the city is the business community. Business leaders often have personal contacts with the decision-makers of their city, and also bring to bear the economic power of their wealth. A threat to remove a particular industry to another city can purchase the relaxation of pollution controls for instance. The informal networks of power within the city are very strong, and depend on the control of information and the return of favours.

iv. The Remove of Decision Making

The vast majority of significant decisions concerning the urban environment are made at a great remove from the people whose lives they influence. Administration in the city tends to be centralised, which means that local communities have little influence in controlling their own destiny. This breeds a sense of powerlessness and fate, with individuals resigned to whatever may happen as being inevitable. Community spirit and pride is starved by external control. Conversely, injustice is perpetrated because the decision-makers never have to confront directly the consequences of their decisions. Power in the city is remote and faceless, and those without an understanding of the 'system' are pawns who become dependent and helpless.

2. Institutions and Agencies

The structured injustice of the city creates social 'problems' which then must be addressed if social order is to be maintained. Social problems are responded to by the provision of specialised institutions and agencies. There are a huge number of these within cities. In our own setting the bigger institutions would include the Health Board, the Department of Social Welfare, the Labour Department and the Department of Justice. These in turn operate physical institutions such as hospitals and prisons. At a secondary level are the semi-independent helping agencies such as Housing Network, Access schemes, Prisoners Aid, Schizophrenia Fellowship, Presbyterian Support and Baptist City Mission. While the smaller agencies are more flexible and user-friendly, they easily tend to adopt the characteristics of the larger institutions which help to maintain injustice.

i. Dependency

The larger institutions work on a 'handout' mentality which develops a crippling dependency among the people they 'assist'. The clients are largely passive, being required simply to fill in forms while decisions regarding them are made by people they do not know. They neither participate in planning their own destiny, nor are able to affect decisions by any action or statement they make. In this situation, humans tend to shut down their creative faculties and conform to the system. They lack responsibility, and use manipulation and deception as a means to achieve influence. Although not acknowledged, the dependency is a mutual one in that the institution or agency requires a client population to justify its existence. There is an unconscious pressure to maintain dependency in order to preserve the status quo.

ii. Anonymity

Large institutions do not work with a natural grouping, but with a client population defined by their need. There is no personal relationship between staff and client, and so information about individuals is not remembered but kept on a file. Clients are not 'known' and there is no attempt to understand how the complex social context of a particular person may influence their current 'problem'. The client is defined by their problem, and extraneous factors are excluded. The anonymity which results allows clients to cheat and steal from the institution without feelings of guilt. The atmosphere is very much one of 'them' and 'us'.

iii. Centralisation

In the interests of economy, institutions tend to operate from large centralised premises. Clients must transport themselves to these depots in order to be serviced, or else cope with overloaded phone systems. Queues and long periods of waiting characterise such agencies. Movement from one departmental district to another commonly means the loss of the file, and a consequent stopping of benefits. Centralisation is accompanied by hierarchical authority structures, and once again the remoteness of policy making from the people it directly affects.

iv. Lack of Analysis

Large social institutions are of the 'ambulance at the bottom of the cliff' type. In general, there is a little analysis of the social and political factors which have created this social 'problem', but only a containing operation to prevent it from causing social unrest. In this 'way apparent 'helping' agencies actually perpetuate injustice by minimising its consequences. Although the Health Board may promote health as a preventative measure, little recognition is made of the relationship between poverty and health. To address economic factors is outside the Board's brief In this way an individual or family may receive assistance from a number of different specialised agencies, but in such a way that their circumstances will never change. Each agency is only interested in that aspect for which they have responsibility.

3. Strategies for Change

The theological assumption to be made is that God is a God of justice, and opposed to injustice of whatever type. There is a Biblical expression of God's bias toward the poor and the voiceless. The Christian community therefore has a responsibility toward the establishment of justice and the liberation of the oppressed. It is clear that if urban life is conditioned by structured injustice, the Church must make some response to this situation in its declaration of the good news. Given the above brief analysis of the urban context, the following principles will be important in implementing strategies for change.

i. Participation

If decision making is to be just and representative, it requires participation on the part of all interested parties. This involves a long-term educational role as to the importance of the administrative power base within a city. It may mean working to change the political system so that it is more open to participation by a range of people. Local representation is essential if all areas of the city are to have a say in decisions which affect them.

ii. Accountability

Civic leaders need to be kept accountable for their decisions on a more regular basis that their elective period. They need to face the consequences of their decisions, by being confronted with the people whose fate they may be deciding. Building relationships with local councillors is an effective means of gaining influence. The flow of information from public bodies should be unimpeded.

iii. Empowering

The people of a particular geographical region within a city, and particularly those at the bottom of the heap, need to be given the motivation and power to begin to determine their own future. heir fatalism needs to be broken down, and this is best done through a learning experience of being able to influence a decision which affects them. This is most effectively achieved through community development.

iv. Community

It is only when the residents of a suburb begin to gain a sense of community that they are able to plan for themselves and attempt to wrest back power from central authorities. Community building is a central role for the Church. Communities provide an environment in which the individual is known, and can be responded to as a whole person rather than as a file on a problem.

v. Devolution

It follows that the big centralised hierarchical institutions should be broken down into more local and human units. Not only geographical decentralisation is required, but also devolution: the granting of authority and decision-making to smaller community agencies.

vi. Self-Determination

Dependency is always unhealthy in mature adults. Where communities can begin to take responsibility for their own situation, and find ways of implementing change, they develop a sense of dignity. Passivity must be replaced by initiative and self-determination. This means addressing and taking responsibility for the social dysfunction of a community, as well as more positive planning and support.

vii. Networking

Lines of power and authority need to be clearly understood in order that they can be influenced for change. Especially within subcultural theory, the city is understood as an accumulation of interrelated networks. Within such networks there are different functionaries such as influentials, brokers, and gatekeepers. It is through such networks that injustice is maintained; if justice is to be achieved, they need to be influenced for good.

viii. Prophetic Denunciation

Those who exploit the poor and attack the vulnerable must have their deeds exposed. The greatest weapon in the fight for justice in the city is truth. The voiceless should have a voice raised on their behalf. The veil must be lifted on corruption and manipulation of the democratic process for the benefit of the wealthy.

1. This section based on course notes by Mike Ridell, 1995 [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Linthicum, Robert
1991 ***City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church,*** Zondervan, p62. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. ibid., p44 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Wink, Walter
1992 ***Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination,*** Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p77 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. ibid., p207 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)