

God's Beautiful City:
Christian Mission After Christendom

By Stephen Fowl

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*To become involved in The Ekklesia Project,
or for more information, please contact:*

Professor Michael L. Budde
The Ekklesia Project
c/o Department of Political Science
DePaul University
990 W. Fullerton Parkway
Chicago, IL 60614
mail@ekkesiaproject.org
(773) 325-1974

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God's Beautiful City: Christian Mission after Christendom

This essay was already completed long before the events of 11 September, 2001. While the themes I articulate clearly touch on issues surrounding how Christians in America are to live in the light of the those horrific events, they do so indirectly. Rather than a response to the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, this is primarily a meditation on Christian mission which begins from a particular psalm and moves over a wide variety of biblical texts and discusses a number of crucial Christian practices. I have two aims in this. The first is implicitly to exemplify a pattern of scriptural interpretation which is attentive to God's drama of salvation. This pattern is not the norm for professional biblical scholars. It is, however, much more useful for the larger theological aims Christians bring to scriptural interpretation. My second aim is to offer a particular argument about the shape Christian mission should take in a world in which Christians can no longer presume to be at the center of things, a world that is largely indifferent, if not hostile, to Christianity.

I take my title from the RSV's translation of Ps.50:2, "Out of Zion, perfect in its beauty, God reveals himself in glory." I am aware that this is not the most formally correct translation of the Hebrew, though it does not misrepresent it. It also uses a masculine pronoun for God, which should generally be avoided. It is, however, this translation as we chanted it in church on one of the Sundays before Advent, that stuck in my mind. Zion is one of the Bible's ways of referring to the city of Jerusalem. The thought here which is so striking is that God's glory is revealed in the beauty of a city, the particular city Jerusalem. What is it that makes Zion beautiful? How is God's glory revealed in this beauty? These are questions to which Christians can give theologically dense answers. In the course of providing those answers, I will also indicate that such answers call Christians to manifest specific practices, particularly practices of peaceableness and reconciliation. Finally, I will try to indicate some ways I think this set of answers and the practices generated in those answers might direct Christian views of mission.

What makes Zion beautiful? There are at least two possible ways to answer this question. The first type of answer pins the source of Zion's beauty on its impressive appearance, the magnificence of its buildings, most notably the Temple. You don't have to go too far from Ps.50 to find this view. In Ps.48, for example, we read:

"Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God. His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. Within its citadels God has shown himself a sure defense" (1-3).

In the middle of the psalm (vv.9-11) there is mention of the Temple, and then the psalm ends with these words,

"Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, consider well its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will be our guide forever" (12-15).
[See also Pss. 46,76 for similar sentiments.]

It is clear from this psalm that the beauty of Zion is directly related to its strength as a fortress. Its impregnable ramparts and citadels are the source of its beauty. If you have some familiarity with the OT, you will recognize that this is a very dangerous way for Israelites to think about the beauty of Jerusalem. The more one reflects on the beauty of fortress Jerusalem as a sign of God's care and defense of Israel in the face of her enemies, as this Psalm does, the less likely it becomes that one can conceive of God subjecting Jerusalem to judgment. This leads to the incorrect assumption that God would do anything, including overlooking Israel's sin, to protect Jerusalem. The prophets, Jeremiah in particular, are quite clear that in the face of Israel's sin and injustice, fortress Jerusalem will be handed over by God to whichever nation God has decided to use to bring judgment on Israel. It is only the foolish who look at the beauty of fortress Jerusalem and assume that such beauty can overcome the darkness of Israel's sin. Indeed, the number of passages which speak of Zion as under God's judgment,

destroyed and desolate, far outnumber those which speak of her beauty. Those passages expressing confidence in Zion's military might are completely overshadowed by those which portray Zion as subject to judgment and violence.

There is, however, another way of thinking about the beauty of Jerusalem. It is spoken of indirectly here in Ps. 50, but receives much more explicit discussion in other OT texts. It is also interesting to note that these same characteristics of beautiful Zion are taken over in the NT to speak also of the Church. In addition, these images work in the same way for several patristic writers. Further, and by analogy, they should work this way for us, too.

As I indicated, Ps. 50 begins with this extraordinary assertion that the perfection of Zion's beauty reveals God's glory. One searches in vain, however, to find any discussion in the rest of the psalm of the magnificence of Jerusalem's buildings or fortifications. The Temple is mentioned, but not as a place of beauty. Rather, it is the site where sacrifice is offered continually. Ironically, God rejects these sacrifices because they are not accompanied by justice, fidelity and truthful speech. In the light of God's expressed desire for justice, fidelity and truthfulness, it would appear that the beauty of Zion is not a function of its buildings but of the sort of common life its inhabitants maintain with God and with each other. Indeed, as the prophets repeatedly note, without justice, fidelity and truthfulness, there is no beauty in Jerusalem's buildings. Moreover, the absence of justice, fidelity and truthfulness leads to God's immanent destruction of Jerusalem.

It is not only Ps.50, however, that ties the beauty of Zion to the common life of her inhabitants. One of the most striking passages to make this claim is found in Isaiah 2:2-5,

"In days to come the mountain of the LORD's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. Many peoples shall come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths'. For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

While Zion is not directly called beautiful in this passage, I think we can see that Isaiah touches on the same theme we found in Ps.50, developing it in several important ways. First, while Ps. 50 speaks of the present perfection of Zion's beauty, Isaiah speaks of some future time when Zion's prominence will be established. Indeed, within the scope of the first two chapters of Isaiah, it is clear that Zion's prominence only comes in the light of her devastation. Isaiah begins with a long litany of God's charges against Israel [1:1-20]. They have forsaken God; they have perverted justice; they have oppressed those in their society least able to defend themselves. In the light of this infidelity, injustice and oppression, God judges the Israelites, promising to hand them over to their enemies and to leave Jerusalem decimated [1:21-24].

Almost in the same breath, God quickly turns to promise redemption and forgiveness to repentant Israel. Jerusalem will be restored. In the words of 1:25, God promises to "smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your alloy. I will restore your judges as at the first and your counselors as at the beginning. Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness." If, as Ps. 50 indicates, Zion's perfect beauty inheres in the quality of her common life, God's promised restoration of a common life based on righteousness in Isaiah 1 leads nicely into the vision of the newly beautified Zion which begins chapter 2.

In Isaiah 2 we learn of restored Zion's beauty through its effects. Restored Zion enjoys a renewed intimacy with God. The common life of its inhabitants is marked by peaceableness. Weapons are turned into farming implements. When the nations see what God has done here in the city, they are fascinated by it, attracted to it, compelled to come near and ultimately drawn into the intimacy that God enjoys with Israel. Listen to what they say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to house

of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we might walk in his paths." The redemption and renewal of the city of Jerusalem is so astonishing, so attractive and fascinating, that the world is ultimately drawn to God by what they see going on here. Of course, this is the very reason for which God calls Abraham in the first place in Gen. 12. The establishment of Israel as the people of God is to bring a blessing to the nations. As the world sees both God's redeeming, loving relationship with Israel and the sort of common life this forms and sustains within Israel, all peoples are drawn to God. In this way the notion of Zion's perfect beauty -- a beauty manifesting itself in lives that are reconciled with God and with others and in a common life founded on justice, fidelity and truthfulness -- is simply a compressed and rich way of reflecting on the divine economy of salvation.

Tying the image of Zion's beauty to the economy of salvation links the salvation of the nations quite closely to Israel's manifestation of a particular common life. God forms and sustains a people whose life with God and each other exudes such a radiance that the world is drawn to God.

This is all well and good, but what about Jesus? How and in what ways does this theme of the beauty of redeemed Zion fit into the gospels and Christian mission? Jesus himself does not offer a very flattering evaluation of Jerusalem. It is the city which martyrs the prophets and ignores God's messengers. Instead of the peaceableness of beautiful Zion, Jesus laments in Luke 19:42 that Jerusalem cannot recognize the things that make for peace. Of course, Jesus is subsequently arrested in Jerusalem and crucified right outside the city. In short, in the gospels, Jerusalem comes to stand for opposition to Jesus.

If I am to continue to develop this theme about the compelling attractiveness of the common life of redeemed Zion, it will not be through a close study of Jesus' own words about this city. I think, however, you see in the gospels, and the NT more generally, that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus brings the theme Zion the beautiful to a climax. At the same time, Jesus' teaching leads to a modification of this theme in theologically crucial ways. Luke's gospel, in particular, makes this clear. In addition, we can see some pretty clear lines of continuity running from images of the beautiful city of God in

the OT to other parts of the NT. These lines of continuity are subsequently used in the patristic period to reflect on the nature of the church and its mission.

Let me begin by noting what I take to be the relatively uncontroversial claim for Christians that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus represents the climactic point in God's ongoing redemption of the people of Israel. To elaborate on this claim I will focus on Luke's gospel, though I think Matthew and Mark also reflect the views I will lay out here. It is important to remember that all of the gospels treat Jesus as the redeemer of Israel. As I regularly remind my students, Christ was not Jesus' last name. Christ is the English form of the Greek word *Christos*. *Christos* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *meshiach* or Messiah. To call Jesus the Christ, is to identify him as the Messiah, the redeemer of Israel.

In addition, at key moments in Luke, other characters in the gospel identify Jesus as the redeemer of Israel. The birth stories in particular are filled with foreshadowings of the redemptive role this yet to be born child will play. Listen to what Gabriel tells Mary about the child she will bear, "The Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David, He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end" [1:32-34]. In response to this news, Mary sings her song, the Magnificat, in which she praises God for "helping his servant Israel, . . . according to the promise made to our ancestors, Abraham and his descendants forever" [1:55-56]. Given this sort of language, it is impossible to make sense of these ways of thinking about the soon to be born Jesus without tying him into God's deliverance of Israel. Then, when the newly born Jesus is presented in the Temple, Simeon proclaims that this child is the promised salvation of God. He will be "a light of revelation to the Gentiles and a glory to Israel" [2:32]. The image here comes right from Isaiah.

Luke presents Jesus as the one who, through his life, work and teaching, is redeeming Israel. Granted, Israel's redemption in Jesus does not take place in the ways that many of Jesus' Jewish contemporaries recognized. Nevertheless, at crucial points in the story we are given divine confirmation that Jesus is doing the Father's will and that God is well pleased.

The crucifixion, however, raises troubling questions about Jesus' status, even among his own followers. Think of that conversation that takes place between the resurrected Christ and two of his followers on the road to Emmaus in Lk.24. These two who are walking from Jerusalem are joined by the resurrected Christ, although they do not recognize him. He begins to question them about happenings in Jerusalem. They tell him about Jesus, his life, his work and his recent death in Jerusalem. They conclude by saying, "we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel" [24:21]. From their perspective, the crucifixion has thwarted their hopes. In conversation with their strange companion, however, they learn that there is more to the story. Indeed, their hopes are given new life, their hearts are set ablaze as their fellow traveler opens the scriptures to them so that they see that the redeemer's death is not the last word of the story. Finally, there is that revelatory moment when they break bread together and he becomes known to them as the resurrected redeemer of Israel.

This is important for my earlier discussion about the compelling beauty of redeemed Zion. As Isaiah notes, Zion only becomes this welcoming beacon to the nations in "the latter days." It is only when the redemption of Israel has happened, when the redeemer or Messiah has come, that the common life between the inhabitants of Zion and God becomes so compelling that the nations observe this and are drawn to God. The problem, as any Jew will point out to you, is that the world is not redeemed. Within 35 years of the resurrection of Jesus, Jerusalem was in ruins. Zion was a pile of stones; the Temple was destroyed and has yet to be rebuilt to this day. If Jesus was the redeemer of Israel, why wasn't and isn't Israel redeemed? Where is the beautiful city that will draw the nations to God?

These questions rang in the ears of the first Christians, too. At least partly in response to those questions, it becomes important to modify this notion of beautiful Zion. Christians must agree that the world still awaits the consummation of its redemption. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus brings about the redemption of Israel and thus the world, yet it is a redemption that awaits its ultimate completion. Even so, when that consummation is spoken of in passages such as Rev.21, the image is of a redeemed Jerusalem, beautiful in all of the ways

mentioned in Ps.50 and Isa.2. Just as the first followers of Jesus waited during that time between the Good Friday and Easter Sunday, contemporary followers of Jesus live in a similar in between time. Redemption has already happened, but has not yet been completed or consummated.

Nevertheless, from the very beginnings of Christianity it was clear to the followers of Jesus that to the extent redemption had already been accomplished, it would primarily be manifested in the communities formed by the followers of the crucified and resurrected one. The church became the place to which Christians could point, saying, "Here is where you will find both a testimony to God's redemption of the world and a foretaste of what that redemption will look like." God's beautiful city was no longer spatially tied to mount Zion. It was mobile. Indeed, it was found throughout the known world.

In fact, in the first couple of centuries of the Church, it was relatively common for theologians as diverse as Origen and Tertullian to point to the Church as the fulfillment of Isa. 2. Listen to Origen as he makes one of his responses to that early critic of Christianity, Celsus. Celsus charges that Christians are nothing more than the rebellious offspring of a rebellious Jew. In response Origen notes:

'In the last days', when our Jesus came, each one of us has come 'to the visible mountain of the Lord', to the Word far above every word, and to the house of God which is 'the church of the living God', 'a pillar and ground of truth'. . . And all the nations are coming to it and many nations go, and we exhort one another to the worship of God which has shone out in the last days through Jesus Christ, saying, 'Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and to the house of the God of Jacob, and he will proclaim to us his way and we will walk in it. . . No longer do we take the sword against any nation, nor do we learn war any more, since we have become children of peace.

Other early Christian theologians such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus make similar connections between Isa. 2 and the Church. Rather than pile up citations, I will try to summarize

some of the characteristics of the early church which led them to make this connection.

First, in the earliest Christian communities, at least for a time, Gentiles were drawn to a predominantly Jewish body. Acts relates this most clearly. Indeed, much of the first 7 chapters of Acts focuses on the reconstitution of Israel in the light of the death and resurrection of the Messiah. Most of these transformations and restorations take place in and around Jerusalem. In time, however, the first followers of the resurrected Christ, all of whom were Jews, spread out from Jerusalem. In halting, sometimes faltering ways, these Jews are led by the Spirit to preach to Gentiles. Much to their surprise, the Gentiles receive the gospel in large numbers. Even Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, always begins by preaching to Jews first when he enters a new town. Acts, Romans, and Galatians in particular make it clear that Christianity is a Jewish movement to which Gentiles are drawn. Indeed, this is so much the case that the first theological controversy these followers of Jesus have to address is whether the Gentiles who join these outposts of redeemed Israel need to become Jews. That is, do they need to be circumcised and observe such things as Jewish food laws, et al? Despite the fact that Paul, among others, vociferously argues that Gentiles need not become circumcised in order to be part of the body of Christ, he also is unequivocal in his commitment to seeing the church as being continuous with God's redemption of Israel. It is the Gentiles who have been grafted in to a Jewish group and not the other way around.

Having said that, it is equally important for these first Christians that they are a single body of Jews and Christians united in the body of Christ. Gentiles neither need to become Jews, nor are they second class citizens in God's redeemed Israel. Unless this is the case, as Paul so clearly saw, there is no sense in which one can speak of Isa.2 finding its fulfillment in these local manifestations of redeemed Israel, which we know as the first churches. Paul saves his sharpest criticisms for those whose doctrines and practices threaten the actual concrete manifestation of a unified body of Jews and Gentiles in Christ. Nowhere in the NT do we find the importance of the unity of Jew and Gentile more clearly stated than in Eph 2:

"You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together in Christ -by grace you have been saved- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God- not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'-a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands- remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with

the saints and also members of the household of God" [1-19].

The second characteristic of these communities which led people to view them as fulfillments of Isa.2 was that they were places of peace. Remember that Isa. 2 notes that when the nations are drawn to the beauty of redeemed Zion, all people turn their weapons into tools. Moreover, they cease to learn war. The earliest Christians embodied this in two precise ways. First, they refused to fight in the Roman army. If they were in the army, they left. In addition, this refusal to fight often cost them their lives, a price many seemed more than willing to pay. In part, this refusal to serve in the army was because as followers of Jesus, Christians are called to be non-violent. It is also due to the fact that life in the Roman army was also tied up with emperor worship and other sorts of idolatry. The links between violence and idolatry might be one that repays a deeper examination than I have space for here.

If the first way in which the early churches were places of peace was in their refusal to participate in the empire's violence, the second way in which these outposts of redeemed Israel embodied peace was in their relationships with each other. This has to do with their practices of forgiveness and reconciliation. These first Christian communities were not morally perfect. One has only to read the Corinthian letters to see that. Rather, what made these manifestations of redeemed Israel places of peace was their practices of forgiveness and reconciliation. Through participating in the common life of these communities, people whose lives were enmeshed in cycles of sin and violence learned to speak truthfully about their sin; they learned to become skilled in asking for and offering forgiveness; they engaged in the hard work of reconciliation so that their restored relationships with God and each other testified to the fact that sin and brokenness were not the last words on their lives.

To the extent that the first churches manifested these practices so often associated with Isa. 2, attracting and welcoming the nations, being places of peace and practicing forgiveness and reconciliation, they were able to offer concrete testimony to God's redemption of Israel through the life death and resurrection of Christ. In this way, they became dispersed

manifestations of redeemed and beautiful Zion through which God's glory is revealed.

Indeed, this beauty was not only evident to those who were drawn to God through the church. Even those who were enemies of the church recognized some of this beauty. Listen to the emperor Julian the Apostate, no friend of Christianity:

Why do we not observe that it is their [the Christians'] benevolence to strangers, their care for the graves of the dead and the pretended holiness of their lives that have done the most to increase atheism [i.e. Christianity]? . . . When the impious Galileans support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our own people lack aid from us?

Yes, of course, there are countless examples of times in which the church failed to manifest a common life worthy of the gospel. Indeed, once the church came under the wing of the emperor, it all too often started to look much more like one more branch of the empire than a concrete testimony to the fulfillment of Isaiah 2. We cannot undo those parts of our past or our present. We cannot pretend they did not happen. We should not, for the most part, try to offer a defense or excuse for our past failures. As people who are schooled in the story of God's forgiveness in Christ, we must simply speak truthfully about our sin, ask for forgiveness and engage in the hard work of reconciliation in the knowledge of God's forgiveness.

At the same time, we should recognize that we, today, are in a new situation. That form of Christendom in which Christianity was used to baptize the dominant cultures of our world is fast dying away. Global capitalism understands, in a way that nation states did not always, that the culture of hyper consumption does not need to be underwritten by a thin form of Christianity. The cultures in which we live and work are, for the most part, independent and ignorant of, if not antipathetic to, Christianity. In many respects, we are closer than we have been in some time to the situation that prevailed in the world from the time of Jesus down to the beginning of the fourth century. Large pockets of our society are comprehensively ignorant of even the most basic Christian convictions, habits and forms of speech. Take this

brief example from my hometown paper, *The New York Times*. In a story that largely derided President Bush's abilities to speak coherent English, the reporter identified this phrase as a Bushism: "why do you worry about the speck in your brother's eye, when you have a beam in your own eye?"

Even attempts to stop this general trend toward secularity no longer invoke language particular to Christianity. Instead, we are presented with faith-based initiatives as if the faith of Christians was interchangeable with the faith of Jews, Muslims and Branch Davidians. Rather than invest energy in trying to revive Christendom, we should see in our present circumstances an opportunity to think anew about Christian mission.

In the light of some of the themes I have laid out here, I think we can generate some ideas. First, it is God's desire to draw all people to Godself. One of the primary ways in which this happens is when people observe the relationships the people of God form and maintain with each other and before God. This common life before God is so fascinating, compelling and ultimately attractive, that people are drawn to it. In doing this they are drawn to the God whose glory is revealed in these beautiful communities. In the OT this beauty is located in Zion, the city of Jerusalem. While the OT portrays the beauty of Jerusalem in a variety of ways, the particular beauty which both attracts the nations and appropriately reveals God's glory is not based on the structures in the city, but on the quality of the common life sustained within its walls, a common life dedicated to justice, fidelity and truthfulness.

Indeed, this image of beautiful Zion is further developed in Isaiah as a way of reflecting on the nature of God's ultimate redemption of Jerusalem. In the light of the violence which Jerusalem has both perpetrated and suffered, Isaiah's vision of God's beautiful city emphasizes peace and peaceable relationships. Indeed, as the nations are drawn to the redeemed city of God, they transform their weapons into tools. When we get to the NT, we see both continuity and change with regard to this image. Continuity comes initially in Jesus' mission as the redeemer of Israel. The life, death and resurrection of Jesus is the climax, rather than the disintegration, of God's dealing with Israel. Jesus inaugurates the redemption of Israel and the redemption of the world which follows in its wake. While that

redemption is yet to be completed, it is also concretely present in the communities formed by the apostles. It is apparent that these communities see themselves as manifestations of God's redeemed city. No longer is Zion bound to Jerusalem. The city of God is now to be found in dispersed and local manifestations of redeemed Israel, that is, the church.

Indeed, we find that for several centuries after the death and resurrection of Jesus, Christians saw in these communities the fulfillment of Isa. 2. The nations were drawn to these outposts of redeemed Israel. Jew and Gentile sat down at the same eucharistic table, bound together in one body because they shared in one bread and one cup. Moreover, these communities were places of peace, manifesting the forgiveness and reconciliation which God had shown them.

In this situation, Christian mission became tied to concrete groups manifesting the life of God's beautiful city in the specific contexts in which they found themselves. If we, too, find ourselves in a similar situation, we would do well to reflect on the importance of local manifestations of God's beautiful city in the contexts in which we find ourselves. As was clear with Jerusalem's beauty, the beauty of contemporary outposts of God's redeemed people will not inhere in structures, but in practices, in the manifestation of a particular common life.

In this light, we would do well to look at the three particular practices which marked the common life of the early churches in ways that led people to see those churches as fulfillments of Isa. 2. In fact, I will conclude by looking at what these practices might look like in our present situation.

In terms of the Gentiles being drawn to Israel such as we read in Isa. 2, Luke, and Acts, we find the biggest difference between our world and Jesus' day. For Paul, the unity of Jews and Gentiles in the body of Christ was paramount. Further, this unity was predicated on Gentiles not having to become Jews first. Of course, even by the end of Paul's life, the churches were not simply mixed groups, but overwhelmingly Gentile. Moreover, we are heirs of almost two millennia of almost exclusively Gentile Christianity. What do we make of the inclusion of Gentiles into redeemed Israel when there are no longer Jews in the Church? I think there are several issues here. First, Christians must always see themselves within the scope of

God's drama of salvation. We must understand, however, that this drama does not begin with Jesus. Rather it has its roots in creation and in the calling of Abraham. To use Paul's image, we must constantly remind ourselves that it is we who have been grafted into the olive tree which is Israel. This should inspire a measure of humility and an appropriate sense of gratitude, if nothing else.

In addition, by bringing Jews and Gentiles together in Christ, God accomplished the reconciliation of two groups who often saw each other as the personification of all that was wrong in the world. Moreover, as Acts and the Pauline letters indicate, this was done without forcing the Gentiles to become Jews. This may point us to ways in which our communities welcome those who are most different from us. Are we attentive enough to recognize the Spirit's work in their lives and welcome them into the body of Christ without making them become just as we are? Can we learn to extend the hospitality to others that God extends to us in the eucharist? This would be a sort of hospitality that welcomes outsiders in all of their difference. At the same time, such hospitality would invite them into the body of Christ where we are in the process of being transformed into the image of Christ.

In our own American context, it strikes me that contemporary manifestations of God's beautiful city will need to be places where some of our deepest racial and ethnic hostilities are reconciled in ways that transform both sides of the divide, rather than forcing one group to become just like the other. Sadly, it appears that the judgment that Sunday at 11 was the most segregated hour of the week is as true today as it was 35 years ago. This cannot be the case in God's beautiful city.

In comparison with the coming of the nations to beautiful Zion, the practices of peace, particularly those of Isa.2, seem much more concretely applicable to us. Although this is the case, these practices are no easier to embody, particularly in the light of Jesus' life and teaching. I have a couple of brief things I would like to say about the practice of peaceableness. From the outset, it was clear to the early Christians that participation in the Roman army was simply not compatible with Christian convictions. They understood this in two particular ways. First, they took Jesus' admonitions to forswear violence with the

utmost seriousness. We should do likewise. Secondly, they were attentive to the fact that participation in the imperial army not only would implicate them in violence, it would also lead them into idolatry. That is, participation in the army would force them to ally themselves with a variety of beliefs and practices which would compromise their Christianity. In retrospect, idolatry always seems to present people with a set of stark contrasts to fidelity. It appears that only the most corrupt, or those whose spiritual blindness is total, could become idolaters. That, however, is not the way most people become idolaters. Nobody wakes up, checks the sky, and then says, "today I will become an idolater." Rather, it is through a series of small, seemingly insignificant compromises and apparently benign or even prudent choices that people move very slowly and incrementally down the path of idolatry. A small compromise at work, a seemingly prudent business decision, a small lie in a friendship, and all of a sudden you wake up and there is the prophet Amos pointing out that your life has become so distorted that you no longer properly worship God.

Peaceableness, then, not only demands that we foreswear violence, but that we are attentive, even vigilant, to the subtle ways in which everyday decisions, practices, and relationships can ultimately distort our life with God. Without question, such vigilance will lead members of God's beautiful city to examine closely, criticize, and often resist elements of the cultures in which they find themselves. This should remind us that the beauty of God's city does not so much stand as a contrast to the ugliness around us as it works to expose and stand as an alternative to the false beauty of other cities.

Finally, I am convinced that the most attractive element of God's beautiful city is not the moral perfection of its inhabitants (though that is to be encouraged), but the fact that their sin is not the last word on their relationships with God and each other. Both in the first centuries of the church and today, people are drawn to communities whose practices of forgiveness and reconciliation are in good working order. It is crucial, however, that we remember that forgiveness and reconciliation are composed of a variety of interconnected practices, all of which need to be operative for true reconciliation to take place. For example, it is really impossible to have reconciliation in the

absence of truth. Of course, truth is the first casualty of sin. Nevertheless, unless we can learn to speak truthfully with each other and God, we will never really achieve the restoration of friendship and intimacy which is the sign of reconciled, reconciling people. In the absence of truth, forgiveness becomes what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace." In the absence of truth, repentance becomes a series of procedures aiming to pay off a debt we have incurred with God and others, rather than an opportunity for our own transformation. Of course, it is very hard to become practiced at speaking truthfully about ourselves, and particularly about our sin, in the absence of communities where we are hopeful of being forgiven and achieving reconciliation. That is, if we do not have reason to hope that the ruptures caused by our sin can be repaired, then we have little incentive to speak truthfully of our sin.

These, then, seem to be some of the crucial practices which mark the common life of God's beautiful city. In this light, the mission of the church as the concrete, embodied witness to God's redemption of the world in Christ, is to seek, to form, and to maintain precisely this sort of common life, so that its witness will be both truthful to God and so fascinating, compelling and attractive that the world is drawn to God.

Stephen Fowl is Professor of Theology at Loyola College in Maryland and a member of the Steering Committee of the Ecclesia Project. He has written widely on the relationship between scriptural interpretation and the Christian life. An Episcopal lay person, he and his family attend the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Baltimore.

