Urban Ministry and the Kingdom of God

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Contents

The Structure of this Book
Acknowledgements

Part 1: Telling the Urban Story
1 Welcome to an Urban Life
2 Telling the Urban Story
3 The Story of Urban Mission

Part 2: The Urban Challenge Today
4 The New Urban Challenge
5 Urban Meanings

Part 3: The Jesus Challenge
6 Jesus, His Mission and His Praxis
7 The Marks of the Kingdom

Part 4: People in Mission
8 Street-level Ministry
9 Moving into Urban Mission
10 Wider Horizons

Notes
Additional Reading and Resources
Index

The Structure of this Book

All theology has a context and it is therefore of utmost importance that we acknowledge our context or incarnation, and do our theologizing accordingly. Many theologians find that idea very challenging, apparently thinking that when they do theology they somehow become disembodied spirits. Some proclaim themselves to be doing 'contextual theology' when in fact all they do is look at their context and then draw abstract conclusions about it. I want to be much more ambitious for theology than that.

In an earlier book, Let's Do Theology, I describe contextual theology as the dynamic interaction of four elements, and that is why this book has a fourfold shape. It seems to me that the first requirement of contextual theology, and therefore its first element, has to be an acknowledgement of where we are, and to whom we belong. And so the first part of this book seeks to tell the story of our urban context here in the UK and the place the Christian Church has within that. While that first element might be described as a 'story-telling' phase of theology, the second element of a properly contextual theology requires that we look more objectively and analytically at our situation so that we can discern the values which underlie our present urban context and name the issues that emerge. The second part of this book therefore looks intently at our present urban situation in the light of more recent learning and experience, drawing out the values and meanings of our urban culture.

Third is that element of theology which we usually call ‘theological reflection’. The third part of the book therefore tries to draw together all that has gone before - our story, and our analysis - and reflects upon all that in the light of the Gospels and the story they tell us of Jesus of Nazareth. His central focus upon the Kingdom of God leads us particularly to reflect in this book on how the Kingdom principles shed light on our present urban predicament. Finally, the fourth element of ‘doing theology’ demands contextual response, and so the fourth part of the book asks how we should respond to the delights and challenges of our urban world in the light of our analysis and theological reflection. We describe what the key features of a Kingdom-based urban ministry and mission might be.

The book therefore divides into four parts, derived from that fourfold understanding of how contextual theology functions, although even within each chapter the interplay of these four elements can be discerned. To help the reader to see where each chapter locates in this fourfold cycle of ‘doing theology’, it may be useful to glance from time to time at the Contents page of the book, although I hope that the book’s shape will feel quite natural, especially to those accustomed to the processes of contextual theology.