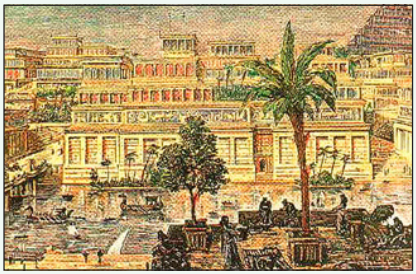
Seeking the shalom of the city

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- an artist's depiction of ancient Babylon

... ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country - John F. Kennedy

Renewing the civic involvement of God's people

Two misconceptions preclude God's people from blessing pagan nations. Firstly, some people expect the imminent establishment of his kingdom and consequently give no value to the enrichment of secular society. Secondly, many regard civil government and its institutions as unworthy of attention. God's word challenges both errors.

During the Fifth Century BC, God's people in exile at Babylon expected to be restored to Jerusalem *within two years* (Jeremiah 28:3), and therefore held little interest in the life of that pagan city-state. So God challenged those isolationists to participate fully within pagan society, since the restoration would in fact await *seventy years* (29:10). Hence God gave this instruction: *"Build houses and settle down; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Marry and have sons and daughters .... Also seek the peace and prosperity* [literally the *shalom* or the *"well-being"*] *of the city. Pray to the LORD for it, for if it prospers you too will prosper"* (29:5-7). Years later, Jesus stated: *"It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set"* (Acts 1:7) but he urged each disciple to work, saying: *"it will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns"* (Matthew 24:46).

As God's people were to bless and pray for Babylon, Christians today should pray for *all those in authority* (I Timothy 2:2) and enrich society, recognising that *through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted* (Proverbs 11:11). While some people are called to civic leadership, such as the faithful servant who was told to *take charge of ten cities* (Luke 19:17), all should recognise that *the authorities that exist have been established by God* (Romans 13:1) and we must therefore embrace and utilise God's good gift of government.

Ministering and excelling in the name of God

Where possible, God's people should enrich pagan society by excellence that specifically glorifies his name. So when the Queen of Sheba *heard about the fame of Solomon and his relation to the name of the LORD* (I Kings 10:1) she was *overwhelmed* (10:5) and said, *"Praise be to the LORD your God"* (10:9). Ministering to various aspects of human existence such as political, intellectual and civic need, Christians are called explicitly to glorify God, and to urge humanity to accept not only the benefits of his wisdom, but especially *Christ ... the wisdom of God* (I Corinthians 1:24). By that approach we take seriously the rebuke given by Jesus to those who received benefit from his ministry - but then completely disregarded the significance of his miracles: *"... you are looking for me, not because you saw miraculous signs but because you ate the loaves and had your fill"* (John 6:26). So our task is to honour Jesus who said, *"... let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven"* (Matthew 5:16).

Regaining custody of wisdom and knowledge

Foolish actions have led many Christians to forsake custody of wisdom and knowledge regarding society, and thereby to cease giving leadership in the world. Since *for lack of guidance a nation falls* (Proverbs 11:14) our culture cannot afford to abandon the wisdom of God - nor can Christians abdicate responsibility as salt and light. Rather, we can regain custody of wisdom and knowledge, holistically meeting all the needs of mankind (spiritual, physical, intellectual, political etc) and glorifying God by excellence that brings civic influence, as noted in Proverbs 22:29 - *Do you see a man skilled in his work? He will serve before kings; he will not serve before obscure men.*

So Daniel (1:4-5) learned *the language and literature of the Babylonians*, and provided Godly leadership to pagan administrations, under four kings: **Nebuchadnezzar** (1:1), **Belshazzar** (5:1), **Darius** (5:31), and **Cyrus** (6:28). Following Daniel's service, Nebuchadnezzar told *all the world* of the *signs and wonders that the Most High God has performed* (4:1-2) and then Darius instructed the people *to fear and reverence the God of Daniel* (6:25-26).

Christians today can excel through interaction in the secular civic arena by prayer, proclamation and participation. Sharing the wisdom of God, we can *seek the shalom of the city* and achieve excellence that commends the faith to unbelievers so they will come to know and to honour Christ - *in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge* (Colossians 2:3).

Jesus and the peace of the city

Jesus drew spiritual truth from instances of civic interaction that he cited as worthy exemplars - that can helpfully inform our peace-making actions:

Concerning the justice system - Jesus stated: *"Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court ... or he may hand you over ... and you may be thrown into prison ... until you have paid the last penny"* (Matthew 5:25-26). This affirms conciliation, litigation, and restitution that may be secured by the threat of jail. He also upheld persistent legal appeal in his parable of a widow who gained justice from a godless judge (Luke 18:6).

Concerning peace treaties - Jesus spoke favourably regarding the king who *"will send a delegation ... and will ask for terms of peace"* (Luke 14:32). So Jesus upheld the concept of international peace-talks and diplomacy.

Concerning civic leadership - Jesus spoke against kings who *"lord it over"* others and are called *"Benefactor"* - a title of emperors - eg: *our saviour and benefactor, Augustus* (Philo, *Flaccus* 10:73). But he valued good governance by urging *the one who rules* to be like *the one who serves* (Luke 22:25-26). The emperor and all civic rulers should, like Jesus, serve as they lead.

By declaring, *"I did not come to bring peace, but a sword"* (Matthew 10:34) Jesus rejected the idea of "peace at any price" and described the unintended disruptive result of his ministry that - if received by all - would bring harmony. So as *Prince of Peace* (Isaiah 9:6) Jesus said, *"Blessed are the peacemakers"* (Matthew 5:9). Further, his peace comes from inner renewal: *"my peace I give you"* (John 14:27a) unlike the peace achieved by threat of force: *"I do not give to you as the world gives"* (John 14:27b). But as people lacking inner peace bring suffering to others, they have to be restrained by the civic authority, who - as God's servant - *does not bear the sword for nothing* (Romans 13:4).

Community service and the shalom of the city

Peace in the world is especially enabled by community service, although the volunteer ideal is rapidly eroding and many service clubs and associations are faltering. Societies will regain the volunteer ethos by rethinking the role of government, as citizens of yesteryear did not look to the State to solve civic problems, but formed action groups as a local response. God's people today can lead the process of reviving and enabling volunteer work, with excellence and explicit testimony, so all those we assist may know that *every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father* ... (James 1:17).

Practical options for seeking the good of society

Civic systems do not run themselves, but they function by the blessing of God as good people enrich society. This requires us to look for opportunities to prosper the community and provide leadership for its development, in accord with the saying (of unknown source), *The world is run by those who show up*.

It is vital for the people of God to grasp ministry possibilities, overcoming the lethargy which Thomas Edison famously warned against, when he stated:

> *Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.*

Instead of ignoring possibilities for blessing the community, God's people can endeavour to assist society by civic engagement - as follows:

- Writing to a civic authority, or to the editor of the daily newspaper;
- Participating in public inquiries and attending community consultations;
- Arranging prayer breakfasts to encourage political leaders and authorities;
- Running childbirth classes and parenting seminars, leading to kids' clubs;
- Placing tracts in letterboxes to share a gospel-based view of social issues;
- Supporting a Neighbourhood Watch group or a community service club;
- Joining a political party and helping it determine the two key party-political decisions: the selection of candidates and the formation of policy;
- Establishing links with police, fire fighters, ambulance officers, teachers, public servants, militia, transport workers, trades persons, administrators, healing professionals, union officials, lawyers, retailers etc - asking them to help the church comprehend and encourage their God-honouring work.

If God's people excel and bless others, unbelievers may seek our help - just as *the whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart* (1 Kings 10:24). As *one greater than Solomon is here* today (Luke 11:31) whose Spirit guides us toward excellence that commends the faith, let us indeed bring shalom to every part of the world God loves.

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