



**METROPOLLINATING** - *"thinking about what it means to be an Urban Christian."*

## **CONTENTS:**

(Articles were printed initially in **Holiness Today** magazine. Printed with permission)

1. In Search of the Perfect City
2. Angels We Have Heard Below
3. The Prosperous Void
4. Move Over Los Angeles
5. City Saints
6. High Points and Lowly Living
7. A New Vision
8. Descent Into Hell
9. The Beau and the Don
10. Pray It Again Sam
11. Cali's Christian Cartel
12. Perpelexed in the City
13. Bethlehem Through Trifocal Lenses

## IN SEARCH OF THE PERFECT CITY

by Fletcher L. Tink

I have a great, passionate love for cities. I enjoy meeting them and getting to know their quirks and graces, their challenges and struggles. I have learned something from every city I've visited, both those with ancient histories and those still rough and raw. I have even learned lessons from make-believe cities, and the heavenly city I can only imagine.

Venice is the most photogenic city on earth, the Mistress of the Adriatic Sea. In the piazza, the Basilica of San Marcos presides in religious majesty. Gondolas glide through a labyrinth of canals, the water washing rhythmically against the walls of tidy, dollhouse buildings charmed by time. The city pulsates with romance.

On the other hand, the city of Disneyland is consummate family fare. Orchestrated to fuse technology with nostalgia, fantasy and fun lie behind trim avenues and walkways so safe, so convenient, that no stranger can feel intimidated. Controlled fear is reserved for the thrills of rides contrived to simulate danger. Cartoon characters rule the Magic Kingdom.

Both Venice and Disneyland are enchanting, safe, and almost perfect. But in contrasting ways, both are sadly unreal.

Venice is perfect because after a thousand years only good architecture remains; the matchbox stuff has long been torn down. But walking the gilded streets of Venice, I realized this charming city is a museum slipping slowly into the sea. It is an artifact, a relic. Young people leave Venice, because history, even noble history, elegant and perfected, cannot guarantee a future.

Neither is there a future in the purposeful perfection of Disneyland. By the artful cheerfulness of its creators, I am merely a pawn of the psychology of consensual control. The city's cleanliness and safety are regulated at deeper levels than I recognize. Dare to violate Disney's control, and the patron is ushered out, the dismissal softened with plastic smiles. Disneyland is fine for a day or two, but I wouldn't want to nest there forever.

I have nested in two "planned" cities, Brasilia and Washington, D.C. I've seen their plans dismantled as human spontaneity and need blotched the blueprints with squats, ghettos, violence, and creative abandon. Yet both cities are vibrant, livable, and challenging, preferable to the Venices and Disneylands of wishful imagination.

One city I will never forget is Old Jerusalem. Fascinated by its impenetrable layers of history, I scoured the city for jewels of cultural and historical insight. In Jerusalem, the future remains ambiguous, open-ended, with safety an elusive prize. But what a surprise when, near the Joppa gate, I heard through closed doors the rousing sound of Christians singing and noticed the sign: *Church of the Nazarene!* Behind the doors was a group of Palestinian Nazarenes testifying to their faith against the city's backdrop of uneasiness and danger.

Jeremiah told the exiles in Babylon to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jer. 29:7). Apparently God’s agenda for these displaced urbanites was centered in the peace and prosperity not of the family, nor of the church, but of the larger context of the city. We, too, must have His agenda for our cities—cities that fail as perfect, enchanting, or comfortable--cities that cry out for our creative, redemptive, heaven-initiated involvement.

The promised byproduct of such engagement is our own prosperity as the Church, as families, and as vibrant individuals!

Ironically, the more that I work at this urban thing, the more my fantasies of the heavenly city fail me. In cities here, I seek challenges and growth, with a little spice of danger in the mix. What will heaven be? For all my imagination and passion for cities, God’s own grand urban design no doubt surpasses the best my vision can anticipate.



## **ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD BELOW**

by Fletcher L. Tink

St. Augustine said, “Every meeting is a divine encounter.”

My heavenly encounters don’t usually come with the rush of angel wings. Instead, they come with wrinkles, worries, and work schedules. They come hovering not in shepherd fields but in city traffic. They are my urban angels, found not above but below.

Today I find myself in Buenos Aires, Argentina, in the home of doctors Alberto and Rosita Ainscough. For me it is holy ground, staked out on a quiet street in this elegant city of 12 million people, the site of a series of encounters with urban angels 30 years ago. My memories are as vivacious today as any Argentinian tango.

It was 1969, and I was a Peace Corps volunteer in Brasilia, Brazil, intent on discovering neighboring nations to the south. I spent a week at a Nazarene youth camp near Campinas, taping messages by the speaker, Joaquim Lima. Then I bused my way through southern Brazil to Montevideo, Uruguay, where I spent four entertaining days with the Denton missionary family. Missionary Ron placed me on the plane for Buenos Aires with the plan that missionaries there would retrieve me.

No such luck. A lonely airport at midnight, a bus ride into town, and I was dumped off at the downtown Hotel Lancaster. The next night, finances forced me to opt for a nearby “pension,” genteel Spanish for “flophouse.”

I fell sick. For five days, I agonized alone in that dingy room, delirious with fever. The stains on the wall became monsters that sneered at my debilitation. At best, I was convinced that I was losing my mind – at worst, that I would die there alone, a Juan Doe snuffed out in the city’s anonymity.

By Friday, I was desperate. In a moment of lucidity, I listened to my Lima tapes and read aloud from my Portuguese Bible, a conscious effort to focus beyond myself. A piece of paper tumbled out of my Bible; on it was the address of Central Church of the Nazarene in Buenos Aires. A shaky shower and taxi ride later, I found myself at its door. It was locked.

At the nearby Nazarene bookstore, I learned that all the missionaries were on a weekend retreat. I vowed to attend services the next day, hoping to attract some medical attention.

On Sunday I met a choir of urban angels.

ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD BELOW: Sitting next to me in church was a dark-skinned man. My Portuguese greeting brought a Portuguese response, surprising in this Spanish-speaking country. He was Cape Verdian – the father of my comforting preacher-on-tape, Joaquim Lima.

ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD BELOW: After the service, Sr. Lima introduced me to two young men, who escorted me to lunch. Piece by piece they deciphered my need and then informed me that one of the absent missionaries had returned home prematurely. They walked me to her house.

ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD BELOW: Missionary Thelma Say opened the door. Learning my name and hearing my distress, she remembered that she and a friend had seen my picture in a denominational publication some months earlier. The friend had recognized me. Coincidentally, he was a doctor. Maybe he could medicate me? She offered his address, and I taxied my way to his house.

ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD BELOW: The doctor answered my knock. Noting my condition, he instantly medicated me and invited me to rest in his house, no questions asked. I slept for 16 hours. When I awoke, my fever had broken. I was fully recovered.

ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD BELOW: “But Dr. Ainscough, how is it that you know me?” I queried.

“My father was a British missionary to Argentina who violated policy and married a local Argentinian girl, thereby excluding himself from missionary support. He remained here, teaching English to support his evangelistic initiatives. At age 18, I was sent to the British Isles to further my education. After 17 days on a boat, I made my way to London. I scouted out the pastor of the Nazarene church in Clapham, seeking refuge and friendship in a strange land. The pastor and his

family embraced me with love during my days in their home. I studied a year and then returned to Argentina, where I trained to be a cardiologist.

“Perhaps, Fletcher, you don’t remember. It was 1953, 16 years ago, and you were only 8 years old. In my loneliness, it was your family who took me in.”

The synchronicity of God’s ways left me speechless. I had met a string of urban angels, and the string had led me back to my own parents.

So I’m back in Buenos Aires after 30 years, on a pilgrimage of thanks. Alberto and Rosita again offer their beds. This time I come with my doctor wife, some Spanish abilities, and some skills and services to offer—not quite so empty-handed as last time.

St. Augustine also said, “Every meeting is an exchange of gifts.” Angels and gifts! Hang around long enough, and you’ll find cities surprisingly full of them.



## **THE PROSPEROUS VOID**

by Fletcher L. Tink

Urban mission specialist Ray Bakke observes that if the 20th century confronted Christianity with the challenge of proving Jesus as God, then the 21st century, with its pragmatic bent, will ask, “So what?” In urban ghettos where crime and poverty reign, Christian ministry spreads fingers of light like a candle at midnight. But what about the seemingly ideal cities? When prosperity rules, will the self-sufficient response to Christ’s offer of a better way always be, “So what?”

This question has hounded me as I’ve wandered around two wonderful cities, both quite secularized and yet absent the notorious urban decay seen so readily in North American cities.

Set lusciously in a glorious valley rimmed by the peaks of the Alps, Berne, Switzerland, capital of the country with the highest per capita income in the world, is home to 150,000 residents. Founded in 1191 and matured in the Swiss Reformation, Berne recently celebrated 800 years of democracy. Crime is minimal, almost everyone is employed, life expectancy is about 80 years, and there are no slums. Natural beauty, medieval charm, justice, and order reign. It has juggled its multicultural character and official languages (four of them) with minimal stress and maximum accommodation.

Yet, I was shocked to find in a downtown park of this city an open drug market. Scores of young people in various stages of dress, consciousness, and sexual activity moved in a foggy netherworld, the complete antithesis of what one deems the Swiss character. Given their seemingly idyllic world, I had to wonder why the Swiss youth would dabble in the perverse.

Singapore is a tropical city-state, located at the tip of the Malay peninsula. Its almost 3 million residents—Chinese (76 percent), Malay (15 percent), and South Asian (7 percent)—live in relative opulence and harmony, particularly in comparison with the rest of Asia. A young and handsome city founded in 1819 by the British, Singapore gleams with multinational corporate high-rises. Its severe penalties for littering make the city devoid of graffiti, trash, and bubble gum blotches. Singaporeans enjoy full employment, little crime, and publicly built housing for two-thirds of the citizens. The government even finances families who take care of their own elderly. The world leader in biotechnologies, Singapore also produces over 50 percent of the world's computer disks. Racial cooperation is evident between its diverse population located in delightful neighborhoods such as the Arab district, Chinatown, and Little India. The declared goal of the city leaders is to provide “the perfect urban environment.”

Yet, the depth of the majority goes only as far as materialism. I learned that, for most young businessmen, the mantra for success is the 5 “C’s”—“car, condo, cash, credit card, and country club.”

As near ideal as they may seem, these cities have their own sense of void. Are they saying, “So what?” to Christ’s offer of a better way?

I was in Berne to speak at an urban conference sponsored by a new fellowship known as the Basilea (the Church of the Nazarene does not have ministries in this part of Switzerland). They met in the stodgy Swiss Reform Church building with its austere, chestnut-colored decor and musty stained-glass windows. In contrast, the place was pulsating, packed out with 600 young adults and a worship team that rocked in two languages. I found a receptive congregation seeking a profound relationship with Christ. Before the service even officially began, small bands of youth were falling on their knees, pleading for God to deliver them from their lifestyle bondages—drugs, sexual addiction, bitterness—all in a city that offered the highest materialistic aspirations.

In Singapore, I spent time with my friends from The Eagle’s Nest (again, the Church of the Nazarene has no churches here). They have fashioned a Saturday evening ministry—a black-tie affair for the business elite composed of a banquet and a Christian show that invites non-Christian guests into an elegant, nonthreatening social occasion. They come, enjoy the presentation, and then, around tables, discuss the claims of Christ on their secularized lives. Hundreds of Singaporeans have been evangelized in this fashion and then cycled into the local churches—their five “C’s” culminated in Christ.

Tony Campolo has said that when he gives an altar call to young people to become saved and go to heaven, the response is minimal. When the challenge is given to be a part of God’s program to change the world with the precondition that they must yield themselves to Jesus Christ and Kingdom values, then the altars are lined.

Henri Nouwen has described “nuclear man” as seeking for transcendency and mysticism, realities that can be found most authentically in a healthy, vibrant, open-ended Christianity.

“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters” (Isaiah 55:1) – a blanket invitation to satiate the emptiness of meaning in life, whether prosperous or poor, idyllic or ghetto.

I congratulate Berne and Singapore for the delicious quality of life they provide for their citizens. But only God through Christ can offer the urbanite the transcendency for which we were made.



## **MOVE OVER LOS ANGELES!**

by Fletcher L. Tink

The first Nazarenes were an audacious lot who, in their holy euphoria, dared to bite off a big urban chunk of vision. On October 30, 1895, the organizing minutes of what is now the Los Angeles, California, First Church of the Nazarene, the acknowledged “Mother Church” of the denomination, declared, “The field of labor to which we feel especially called is in the neglected quarters of the cities and wherever else may be found waste places and souls seeking pardon and cleansing from sin. This work we aim to do through the agency of city missions, evangelistic services, house to house visitation, caring for the poor, comforting the dying. To this end, we strive personally to walk with God and to incite others so to do.”

Knowing Los Angeles First Church intimately, I had the privilege of seeing it come full circle when it returned to that vision in the 1980s. Under the leadership of Ron Benefiel, the church during those years fashioned its philosophy of ministry to emphasize five concepts. The church’s ministry must be: *comprehensive* (including all people); *holistic* (addressing the whole person); *contextual* (delivering the gospel in forms and ways that are natural to the people who receive it); *incarnational* (coming from within their worlds rather than from outside); and *community-based* (recognizing that God’s ultimate healing is best found within the Christian community).

The renewed vision worked wonders. Five congregations organized into one church, and they throbbed with activity and ministry. The church developed a tag team of services and programs featuring training programs, medical services, youth mobilization, community events, group homes, and evangelism on a dozen fronts. The congregations grew up and together on the cutting edge of creativity. They spun off new ministries: Center City Church of the Nazarene welcomes 350 worshipers in the rescue mission district; Hollywood’s Children of the Shepherd

project reaches street runaways; and Los Angeles Exposition Park is located in a transitional Hispanic/Black neighborhood near South Central Los Angeles.

But there is another church that may have “out-Bresee-ed” even founder P. F. Bresee’s vision for Los Angeles First Church. This church does have conventional ministries, including four Sunday services for 2,000 people, a daily prayer ministry with a goal of cells in 500 homes, evangelism and discipleship ministries, visitation to new families and to prisoners, a businessmen’s association, a women’s ministry through music, camps for children and youth, and a soup kitchen that fed 30,000 people last year. But those are only the start. Other ministries include:

- Funeral ministry: Contracts with funeral homes to help grieving families.
- SOS Rescue: Ministry to drug addicts.
- Ministry of Silence: Ministry to the hearing impaired.
- Athletes for Christ: Organized ministry of surfing, soccer, karate, and boxing.
- Sweeter than Honey: VBS-type program for children during “spiritist” week.
- Radio ministry: 24-hour Nazarene radio station.
- House of the Third Age: Housing for retirees.
- Happy Child Project: Shelter for street children.
- Patin Skaters: Roller and in-line skaters who evangelize among skater clubs.
- Community Center: Built in one of the most infamous hillside slums in the country.
- Couples ministry: Ministry to newlyweds and couples whose marriages are at risk.
- Courses: Painting, sewing, flower-arranging, computers.
- Preschool: 130 students from pre-school through fourth grade.
- Training programs: Electrical trade, swimming, and soccer.
- King’s Teens: Choreography group for teenagers.
- Drama ministry

All told, 35 distinct ministries!

In 10 years, this church has exploded from a membership of 100 to 1,700, spinning off a dozen new congregations in the process! In cooperation with another congregation, this dynamic church recently purchased land to plant a church more than 1,000 miles away in an area where there is no evangelical witness.

Where is this church? NILOPOLIS – a northern suburb of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. According to Pastor Pedro Paulo Matos, the 3 million people around his parish are the abandoned community, forgotten by politicians and other public figures.

Pastor Pedro Paulo shares the secret of the church’s creativity, drive, and growth: “Take advantage of every ministry opportunity. See the poor, widows, children, marginals, and the rejected, and become a servant to all.

“The church can and must live with creativity, winning persons, and to do this does not require money. The Holy Spirit’s presence is enough, and persons in the church bring the money and the human resources.

“Please challenge the people,” he continues, “with their paralyzed lives and their safe money, with their gifts and talents stymied, without doing anything for the kingdom of God, or doing so little. We need to accumulate treasures in heaven. We need to work while it is day. The harvest is ready, but where are the laborers?”

Brazil now has 180 million people, with a median age of 15. A fledgling democracy and an entrepreneurial spirit energize the country. It would be easy to live on the institutions and ideas of the past. But Pastor Pedro Paulo and his people have discovered the entrepreneurial spirit of the Holy Ghost, and they have matched it with the urban needs around them. They would make Phineas F. Bresee proud.



## **FROM HELLMONT TO BELMONT**

by Fletcher L. Tink

The rest of the world knows my city as Washington. For insiders, it is simply D.C.—District of Columbia. Many resent this city as a symbol of big government, high taxes, and political manipulation. It is, without question, “the leadership center of gravity.” Yet for the 7.2 million people who live here, Washington is simply home.

Like most other cities, D.C. has its defining evil, but the evil is subtle and not as outsiders see it. It is an evil that operates in the head.

In Washington one is tempted to think in dichotomies, in “either/or,” in irreconcilable opposites. There is a confrontational mindset here, and the clashes can be ugly. It is easy to be caught up in the hostilities between perceived opposites: Northern culture versus Southern; inside the Beltway versus outside; powerful versus powerless; Black versus white; Republican versus Democrat; rich versus poor. There is much power and influence to be gained by digging in on one side of the fence or the other, so there is little incentive for reconciliation. For the Christian whose message reaches across boundaries, Washington can be an uncomfortable experience.

Political analyst Sidney Blumenthal captured the essence of the problem: “The concept of service has little political currency in Washington. Everyone is fair game, simply by being on the other side. Humiliating one’s prey, not merely defeating one’s foe, is central to the process.”

Yet in the midst of this atmosphere of antagonism, I found grace in two of my Washington friends.

The first is Tom Tarrants III. Before I moved to Washington, Tom called to welcome me to the city. A man of soft, Southern accent and slim, angular features, he became my open door to the world of bureaucrats, politicians, and the Christian community. Some months after we met, he revealed that his secret past was about to be documented in a major book, *Terror in the Night*.

He confessed that he had been a Ku Klux Klan operative in his youth, a “mad dog killer,” the “most dangerous man in Mississippi.” In a “righteous” effort to disrupt the Civil Rights Movement, which he believed was a sinister Communist plan that would mongrelize the “superior” white race, he planted 30 bombs in homes, churches, and synagogues throughout the southern United States. Captured in an FBI sting operation with 19 bullets in his body and impaled on an electric fence, Tom recovered and was sentenced to 30 years in jail. He escaped, was recaptured, and then was sentenced to an additional 6 years. Through it all, he never lost his determination to manipulate his way out so that he could continue “God’s mission.”

But God had other intentions. The Christian wife of the FBI officer who organized the sting led a Bible study, and she and her friends visited Tom weekly. Guided by their ministry and his own studious search of literature and Scripture, he one day fell on his face on the floor and, alone in his cell, received Jesus into his life.

Tom’s story since that day sparkles with grace. He was released years early because the very persons he had attacked vouched for his transformation. He became an FBI informant against the KKK and fled to Washington for fear of reprisals. Since then, he has crisscrossed through agencies and organizations in Washington with clear testimony of God’s reconciling love. Tom Skinner, African-American evangelist, writer, and activist, said, “To know Tom is to know the power of redemption.” President Clinton, after reading *Terror in the Night*, commented in a television interview that the redemption Tom found is the only authentic way to achieve racial reconciliation.

Rita Bright, my second friend, was the epitome of the person Tom loved to hate. Rita was a homeless African-American mother living on welfare in an abandoned apartment on Belmont Street when she responded to the gospel shared by the Community of Hope. The Community of Hope, a bellwether Nazarene ministry a mile and a half north of the White House, provides apartments for families on the economic edge as well as community medical, tutorial, and spiritual ministries. Rita’s life changed dramatically, and she worked her way up to leadership in the very agency that had confronted her with the claims of Christ.

Belmont Street is still a rough-and-tumble place, but I love to teach college-level Bible courses there. One day I asked my students if they knew what the name “Belmont” means. When they had no answer, I offered the idea that it means “belle monte,” or “beautiful hill.” Rita jumped up with unabashed inspiration. “Praise God! Praise God!” she exclaimed. “God is transforming this community from ‘Hellmont’ to Belmont!” We laughed and rejoiced with the glory of her insight.

Later I invited Tom Tarrants to lecture to these same students. What a moment! The former hater stood in the embrace of Rita and others who once had been the fodder for his anger. Their two worlds, once so hostile, merged into one, for God had applied His reconciling balm.

A cynic once said that Washington is a giant Elks Club with a lot of secret handshakes. I'm glad to have discovered within it an eternal Holy Club that cuts across race and class with soul-to-soul embraces.



## **CITY SAINTS** by Fletcher L. Tink

As October withers like spent leaves off a tree, the Christian calendar shoots forth two curious blossoms—Reformation Sunday and All Saints' Day. Modern cities need reformers and saints and everything between. A scan of biblical history introduces us to an eclectic array of individuals who built, evangelized, and transformed cities.

Cain, a murderer, is given a second chance and erects the first recorded city, Enoch, named for his son.

Joseph, a dreamer and economist for Egypt, creates seven-year plans to deal with deficits and surpluses and relocates urban populations for improved economic benefit.

David, a former husbandry specialist promoted to king, designs a holy city where the presence of God and the Shepherd of His people could be found.

Esther, an exiled beauty, joins the harem of her enemy Xerxes under duress and then uses her privileged state to leverage salvation for an oppressed urban minority.

Nehemiah, a Persian layman, receives a government grant and leave of absence to reconstruct the demolished city of Jerusalem. As part of his plan, he announces a "tithing" of people, not just of money, to offer their services and lives to rebuild the city.

Daniel, a politician and adviser in Babylon, a man of impeccable integrity, outlasts several heads of state to bring just order to oppressive urban-based government.

Jonah, a reluctant prophet whom God uses despite his hostility to the mission, brings the message of salvation to Ninevah. The city-wide campaign results in revival with a 100% conversion rate. Jonah, unfortunately, lapses into depression when he discovers that Ninevah, archenemy of Israel, can be both loved and accepted by God.

Jeremiah, a city saint, acts out God's message for the city in symbolic and, at times, bizarre ways, offering warning in good times and hope in bad.

Jesus, the Savior, weeps over the city, ministers principally in the city, and dies just outside the city gate.

Barnabas, a missionary strategist, uses First Church of Antioch to launch urban mission forays into other urban locales.

Paul, a missionary first for Jewish faith and then for Christian, tromps across the urban world to plant and nourish churches through a wide variety of evangelistic techniques, including Socratic dialogue, rabbinical teaching, signs and wonders, personal conversations, and letters. The high point of his calling is his witness in Rome, the center of the empire, where first in chains and then in martyrdom he effectively attacks Satan in the jugular.

And God prepares the New Jerusalem, a city gift-wrapped for those who are ready to receive it as it descends from the clouds.

The pantheon of impassioned urban individuals who create and transform cities is yet being completed.

Francesco Bernadone (1181-1226), a troubled, battle-weary soldier, returns to his hometown on the slopes of Mt. Subasio in green Umbria, Italy. He is impressed by its "numerous family tragedies, impoverished houses, hunger, crime and violence . . . where the moral order could not fail to go to pieces." Francesco undergoes a spiritual conversion, is disinherited by his father, repudiates all symbols of materialism, communes with nature, and finds soul brothers and sisters willing to live in huts. He inadvertently starts a worldwide movement that continues to prod us moderns into concern for the poor, respect for nature, a lifestyle of pacifism, and a spirit of ecumenicity. To walk today around Assisi, a city forever linked with Francesco's name—St. Francis—is to feel not only his impact but also something of the exquisite presence of God.

John Calvin (1509-1564), a theologian and Church reformer, is summoned by citizens of Geneva, Switzerland, to bring order to their besieged and violent city. From 1541 until his death, Calvin materializes his theology into an ideal Protestant society, writing its constitution, developing its school system, building hospitals and sewer systems, offering special care for the poor, and introducing new industries. Today Geneva is known as a center for international diplomacy, the home of the World Health Organization, and the heart of the Protestant Reformation.

William Penn (1644-1718), a victim of religious persecution and internment in England, desires to found a colony where religious freedom is guaranteed. King Charles II grants him land between the Delaware and Schuylkill rivers on the eastern coast of the New World, and in 1681 Penn surveys it, lays it out, and names it Philadelphia, meaning *city of brotherly love*. It is Penn who develops the concept of a penitentiary, a place to rehabilitate prisoners on the basis of penitence. Today, his statue stands tall on the peak of city hall.

John Wesley (1703-91), a missionary failure, comes to the New World to convert the native peoples but laments that he himself needs conversion. His three-year pastoral assignment in sultry Savannah, Georgia, turns disastrous due to conniving women, misguided role expectations, and political intrigue. He returns to England, dejected but receptive to the subsequent Aldersgate experience in London. It rejuvenates his purposes and sets in motion the beginnings of the Wesleyan revival. Savannah is most forgiving, and Reynolds Square now hosts a statue of Wesley, Christ Church notes his services as rector, and Wesley Monumental United Methodist Church honors its faithful son.

Antonio Francisco Lisboa (1730-1814), bastard child of master and slave in colonial Brazil, is a prolific and renowned sculptor. He suffers a debilitating bout of leprosy, which leaves him so physically damaged that he is nicknamed Aleijadinho, Little Cripple. Shortly thereafter, he experiences a spiritual conversion and pledges to spend the rest of his life creating sculptures to praise God. Today, thousands of tourists visit the old colonial cities of Congonhas and Ouro Preto to see the dozens of soapstone statues fashioned by this crippled man to honor stories and personalities of Scripture. He is in good company; the artisans and craftsmen assigned to adorn the tabernacle are the first mentioned in Scripture to receive the infilling of the Holy Spirit (Exodus 31:1-2).

Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu (1910-1997), youngest child of an Albanian builder in Skopje, Macedonia, joins a Catholic order at age 18. She serves first in Ireland and then in India. When a siege of tuberculosis changes her life, she steps out of her traditional compliant role and in 1952 founds the Missionary of Charity Order. We know her as Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Linked to her name, a city that previously connoted poverty and desperation is now seen as a center of practical compassion. Mother Teresa has shown us that great things are done one by one and that we are called to be “little pencils” in the hand of God. He does the thinking. He does the writing. The pencil has nothing to do with it; it is only allowed to be used.

Like the author of Hebrews 11:32, I write, “What more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about” Josephine Butler, a Victorian who fought state regulation of prostitution and confronted the root issues of poverty and women’s civil rights; Octavia Hill, the first social worker; Florence Nightingale, who shattered precedence by establishing the first nursing school and pioneered statistical analysis, saving lives throughout the world; and James Rouse, a contemporary urban developer who on Christian philosophical principles reconstructed Baltimore’s harbor, the Boston Quincy market, and Seattle’s downtown. All these are lives of practical Christian faith.

*The writer of Hebrews identifies their faith. “They were longing for a better country—a heavenly one,” he says. “Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:16). Do we share similar tenacious faith in creating and recreating our cities as we imagine the heavenly city to be? All it takes is one city saint.*



## HIGH POINTS AND LOWLY LIVING

by Fletcher L. Tink

*I have a passionate need to climb to the high points of cities. I've climbed the Eiffel Tower in Paris, Christ the King statue in Lisbon, the Empire State Building in New York, CN Tower in Toronto, and the Parthenon in Athens to catch a breathless view of pinpoints of light strung together in shimmering patterns. On these promontories, my scope is expanded, but my size is diminished. I am reminded of Jesus, who stood at the top of the temple in Jerusalem and was tempted by Satan to plunge below in a demonstration of pseudo-supernatural deliverance. Christ certainly was to be "high and lifted up," but not in the way Satan proposed.*

I used to live in Brasilia, Brazil, where at the very hub of the city stands the curvaceous TV Tower, rising several hundred feet above its knoll. Arnold Toynbee, the historian of civilizations, once visited Brasilia and made this curious observation. He noted that medieval cities generally placed at their highest point the symbol that represented their ultimate values—a cathedral, a cross, or a statue of Christ. Like David, the citizens would look up to the hills for help. In most instances, the help they looked for was based on religion, such as protection to fend off evil and insure God's blessing.

But Brasilia defied that tradition. Its highest edifice celebrates not religious but technological values. On the other hand, writes Toynbee, the city constructed its national cathedral to feature not a spire but a crown of thorns that projects above the red soil. A sloping entrance ramp leads worshipers underground. Brasilia offers a reversion of Christianity that points back to the days of the Roman catacombs, when believers secretly assembled underground among the intertwining graves of the dead.

I've seen strange things at the high points of cities. In La Paz, Bolivia, a huge inflatable Coke bottle once poked its way heavenward. The "HOLLYWOOD" sign marks Los Angeles. In Washington, D.C., a four-sided needle known as the Washington Monument hints at the city's obsession with politics. In St. Louis, a gigantic arch represents a gateway of welcome to the West. And in almost every modern city in Europe can be found some grotesque, fat-barreled, metallic needle with spokes protruding, a celebration of technological achievement. Ironic, isn't it, that when Moscow's version of this structure caught fire, people died because conventional fire equipment couldn't reach them. If I remember rightly, Babel's ziggurat experienced similar disruption.

To be honest, though, I don't know if I want Christian symbols in high places. For the medieval crowd, public proclamation of Christian symbols also was bound up in superstition, power politics, and religious intolerance. We often behave badly when we are on top of things. Worldly recognition and popular acclaim tend to taint us. And engaging in high-stakes economics or controlling cultures seems to bring out the worst in us.

But I do remember two occasions when Jesus did seem to peek through from high above a city.

I was in Sofia, Bulgaria. Political communism had disintegrated from its own excesses. A team of students from Southern Nazarene University had spearheaded mission initiatives through a variety of compassionate mission projects. My wife and I had come to Sofia to spend time with Phil Rodebush, one of those students. His fiancée was so far away and dying from cancer, the political context was so uncertain, and the ministry was so tiring and so tentative that he and his fellow team members wondered aloud about the future.

Phil led us through heavy fog across a central square and pointed up to the emerging shape of a formidable government building. Immediately our eyes were drawn to a neon-lit amber cross in a high corner of the building. That building had been the former heart of the Communist politburo. They were now gone, replaced with the symbol of Christ high and lifted up. It was that symbol of the cross that consoled Phil in those days.

In Seoul, South Korea, neon crosses have been erected by thousands of Christian churches. They stand like sentries above the freeways all around the city. The Christian presence is unusually apparent in this former Buddhist stronghold.

*But I'm told that the real secret of Korean church expansion is the more distant prayer mountains, where urban Christians retreat for days on end into caves and hollows for private intercessory prayer. This commitment to prayer was forged a generation ago in the anguish of war, despair, and persecution when the church had no status at all.*

*Perhaps what we erect over our cities doesn't matter so much. Perhaps more important is that we experience the fullness of Christ, including His sufferings, in life underground, in simple transparency, and in intimate relationship that allows Him and Him alone to stand tall, lifted up where all might see Him.*



## **A NEW VISION**

by Fletcher L. Tink

Cramped, boxed in by urban development, the Nazarene church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, stands just a block off Central Square, where the world gathers. The English-speaking congregation is a cosmic mix: 40 percent Black, 40 percent white, and 20 percent everything between. The church keeps churning out new ethnic congregations—Spanish-speaking, two who speak East Indian languages, Haitian, Portuguese, Chinese, and Korean.

My two-year tenure as preaching pastor for the Cambridge church was marked by one unusual relationship. Marshall wandered in from the high-rise that fronts and dwarfs the church. He is blind, now over 50 years, from a disease he suffered as an infant. He sits in our service and rocks kinetically back and forth. In Sunday School he interjects comments with a sputter, missing visual cues that grease normal conversation.

Marshall is my friend and mentor. He has opened to me a world heretofore unknown, and I am grateful. I probe him about living in the city, and he spills out his enthusiasm. He loves Cambridge, its sidewalks, intersections, and contours. The city defines his boundaries and funnels him to daily adventure. How he enjoys going down to Harvard Square! Every inch is measured and managed. He can slip into the record store, put on earphones, and listen to anything he wants, entranced by his own imagination. People, traffic, and life itself are a bustling symphony. Someone is always ready to offer a hand across traffic, to escort him to a destination, to chitchat. The city hums with hospitality!

On a trip out of town, I seek his assessment of the country. He shudders with fear. To him, the open spaces are sinister voids full of danger and traps he cannot maneuver. In the country, alien spirits and hostile nature reign.

Hearing him, I begin to realize how gracious our cities can be. Here is a brother who is given cut-rate accommodation in a high-rise with others having similar disabilities. Agencies abound to care for his needs: transportation, entertainment, counseling. The city offers sight-impaired friends who surround him with support. He is adept at Braille, and through his reading of it the Word is seen through innovative spiritual eyes. He reminds me that Christ's most-documented miracle is the restoration of sight. Thinking of Marshall, I am increasingly sensitized to my own blindness. Didn't Jesus warn, "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind" (John 9:39)?

A world away, on the southern outskirts of Jerusalem, I crashed an international eye conference attended by my wife. It brought together 75 of the most renowned ocular scientists in the world. Out the hotel window, the town of Bethlehem haunted the horizon.

As a feature of the closing banquet, Philippe, a young Frenchman, was introduced. Once showing great promise as an ocular scientist himself, he had been derailed by his own blindness. He had accepted an invitation to attend, hoping to learn about some potential cure.

Philippe lifted his trumpet and started to moan the blues. Ethereal tones soon filled the room, softening the secular chill of the gathering: "Nobody knows the trouble I've seen; nobody knows but Jesus. . . ."

Tears filled my eyes as other familiar spirituals soothed the room. I looked toward beautiful Bethlehem where Christ had first been ushered in, and I was struck that all around me

the miracle-working Jesus had walked, expelled demons, touched, and healed. In that moment, I ached for those single-minded scientists who diligently sought cures but fell so short for one of their own. The presence of an unrecognized Jesus moved among us in almost palpable form, and a holy awe filled the room.

As I thought of the unseen Jesus, I remembered another sightless witness. Fanny Crosby, 19<sup>th</sup>-century poet of Christian songs for the ages, seemed also to perceive what my eyes beg to see:

Perfect submission, perfect delight  
Visions of rapture now burst on my sight  
Angels descending, bring from above  
Visions of mercy, whispers of love.

From Cambridge to Jerusalem to Bethlehem, I learned of vision not confined to eyes. From Marshall, Philipe, and Fanny I learned that God loves people, unsighted people, all those disabled and the cities that protect them as sanctuary and salve. Maybe for that reason, He is creating a New City where we all will see what has eluded us in our blindness.



### *Descent into Hell*

by Fletcher L. Tink

The west coast of Africa is dotted with dozens of fortress ruins, their high, ominous walls and turrets blanched white, their cannons poised, their flagpoles recalling long-ago salutes to European domination. From 1503 to the mid-1850s, it was from these posts—30 in Ghana alone—that much of Africa was managed, manipulated, and mangled from abroad. From these points of no return, 60 million Africans were dragged into bondage.

I recently visited two of these forts, Cape Coast Castle and St. George's Castle in Elmina, a city on Ghana's picturesque coast a few dozen miles west of the capital, Accra. For me, it was a pilgrimage into the European colonial imperialism of my cultural past, a parallel to the journeys of my African-American colleagues who make the trek to reconstruct their sad heritage.

The forts lie amid languid fishing towns whose children hustle handouts and addresses for pen pals. But to enter the fort at Cape Coast is to creep into the presence of hell.

I was quickly drawn into the men's dungeon, a soot-black room with a dirt floor padded over time with the excrement, bones, and blood of its sorry captives. Pinpoint light barely pierces the cavern, which is devoid of toilets or bathing facilities. Perhaps 15 feet high on the wall is a hole from which food was dropped on the 400 prisoners below. Here one can almost taste death, smell disease, and hear the chilling screams of desperate and claustrophobic men.

Close at hand is the women's dungeon. Three hundred women and children endured conditions similar to those of the men, with one exception. Periodically, they were dragged out to the interior patio area, stripped naked, and hosed down while the fort's military officers and staff stood above, leering, selecting their nocturnal sexual prey. If a woman became pregnant within three months of captivity, prior to shipment to the West, she was released and thrown back into an unforgiving African society. If she was discovered to be pregnant while on the boat, she was tossed overboard.

But most appalling to me was the chapel, which sat snugly just above the men's dungeon. Whites alone were candidates to worship. And their religious platitudes and hymns commingled with the gasps and groans of the desperate and dying just beneath them. The flesh and blood of Holy Communion must have tasted a little rancid with the smell of rot rising from below.

We're told not to judge history on our current enlightenment. But what kind of Christianity was this that severed people from humanity by day only to rape them by night? Was it denial? Was it some kind of twisted paradigm that saw Black people as soulless animals yet as delicacies for violent appetites?

Thankfully, I've found one place where a different testimony surfaces. Far away from Ghana, in Cartegena, Colombia, Peter Claver (1581—1654) paced the streets of the colonial port town as a beggar. Often called "the slave of the Blacks," the Jesuit priest from Barcelona, Spain, would plead with the aristocracy for food that he would then take to the surviving slaves trapped in the hulls of ships in the docks. There he would medicate, feed, console, and indoctrinate, trying in his simple way to protect Africans about to be marketed. He acted according to his motto: "To love God as He ought to be loved, we must be detached from all temporal love. We must love nothing but Him, or if we love anything else, we must love it only for His sake." It is reported that in his 40 years of service to African slaves, more than 300,000 Blacks professed conversion and were baptized. Today, Black Catholics continue to celebrate the memory of their solitary patron who risked all to defend their desperate cause.

Elmina and Cape Coast are reminders of the depths and pathos of sin and a shabby, disconnected, pathological mockery of Christianity. Father Claver and Cartegena remind me that holiness radiates in such contexts. To defend and care for God's most abused children is to capture the essence of the holy heart of God.



## **THE BEAU AND THE DON**

by Fletcher L. Tink

Two men from two different cities met by chance on a crowded English street one day, and 250 years later their meeting is still described with great relish by tour guides.

The two were Richard “Beau” Nash (1674—1762), Oxford-educated dandy and imperious cultural arbiter of Bath, and John Wesley (1703-91), Oxford don and founder of Methodism, whose outdoor ministry began 10 miles away near Bristol.

According to the legend, Nash was itching for an opportunity to embarrass Wesley, the antithesis of his own hedonistic values. While walking through a narrow street in Bath, he saw Wesley moving through the crowds toward him. Nash rushed ahead and confronted Wesley with the words, “Make way, sir! I never give way to fools!” Without blinking an eye, Wesley retorted, “Why, sir, I always do!” and graciously stepped aside for the embarrassed Nash.

*Beau Nash lived the ultimate in self-indulgent, self-gratified hedonism, the belief that pleasure or happiness is the highest good. He had failed as a lawyer and a soldier but struck it rich as a professional gambler. In 1704, he became Bath’s master of ceremonies, conducting public balls with a splendor beyond anything seen before. He marketed sin, implying its respectability, and he made Bath, once a Roman spa, into the pleasure ground of slave traders. Bath became the first town in the world built purely for pleasure, an 18th-century Las Vegas or Monte Carlo.*

As Nash was borne around town in his sedan chair, he cut a striking figure. Decorated like a bird of paradise, he dished out—at a price—trinkets to the courtiers and gentlemen of his day. He heavily influenced upper-class cultural values and fashions throughout England.

Then along came the upstart Wesleys, Charles and John, who along with George Whitefield mobilized the masses in a new way. Whitefield had started preaching in open-air services and in 1739 persuaded John to do the same. Though he felt the fool in his elegant cassock as he preached to grimy laborers and their families, Wesley’s heart ached for the more than 7,000 people he addressed that day. Over the next 50 years, Wesley would preach 40,000 outdoor sermons to crowds sometimes exceeding 30,000 people. Bristol became the cradle of Methodism, and Wesley would spend more time there than anywhere else. Indeed, the Wesley Chapel in downtown Bristol is the first Methodist building in the world and the primary artifact of our own theological heritage.

Yet the appeal of the Wesleyan movement was not just that its methodologies reached out to commoners. It also offered a distinct alternative to the rampant hedonism of the era, a message of holiness that defined the ultimate purpose of living as “[loving] the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself” (Luke 10:27, KJV).

*Self-gratification has limited possibilities when bodies wear out and checkbooks run thin. Holiness offers infinite possibilities; it embraces the eternal in God, the entire in oneself, and the universal in one's neighbor.*

Wesley himself records another encounter with Nash. Nash appeared at one of Wesley's services specifically to intimidate him, asking by what authority Wesley did these things.

"By the authority of Jesus Christ, conveyed to me by the Archbishop of Canterbury," responded Wesley. Nash accused Wesley of violating laws regarding subversive meetings, because his preaching scared people out of their wits, and he challenged Wesley with the question, "What do these people come here for?"

At this point, an old woman stepped into the conversation. "Sir," she said to Wesley, "leave him to me. . . . You, Mr. Nash, take care of your body; we take care of our souls; and for the food of our souls we come here." Nash replied not a word but walked away.

Shortly thereafter, Bath banned all forms of gaming, and Nash, now bankrupt, spent his final years as a pauper. His live-in mistress, Juliana Popjoy, once his partner in ostentation, slunk off to live in a large, hollow tree, vowing nevermore to lie on a bed.

Wesley died in honor at age 88, surrounded by family and friends, proving words he had once uttered: "We Methodists die well!"

*Two men, two cities, but such different legacies. Bristol, now with 400,000 residents, and Bath, now with 80,000, remind us that hedonism and holiness are in constant confrontation. And it is for us to determine which will claim our allegiance and whose fool we will be.*



## **PRAY IT AGAIN, SAM!**

by Fletcher L. Tink

*I've finally found it! I've discovered a great metropolitan city that radiates traditional religious values similar to those we've held! Perhaps here I can feel at home at last.*

This city of 3 million people throbs with public display of genuine commitment to deity. The women dress with modesty. Few beggars appear; the populace seems publicly generous. Holy day observance is prominent. There is little street crime. Religious institutions abound without apparent denominational rivalry and flower in a hybrid of cultural diversity.

Religion and its favorable influence on society are acknowledged openly. Civil institutions are accountable to the religious. Prayer pervades the city. Religious adherents memorize the sacred book. Alcohol for the faithful is strictly forbidden. And the theory of evolution is dismissed as pernicious.

I go to one of the worship centers. Thousands mill around. The beauty and the grandeur of this modern edifice, with its exquisite marble and tiles, are unexcelled. These people take their religion seriously. I am awestruck.

The irony is that the religion is Islam and the city is Casablanca, nestled against the Atlantic in the Muslim nation of Morocco. It bears little resemblance to the images of the classic movie that bears its name, with only a hotel restaurant mimicking the movie's barroom scene.

The great worship center is the glorious Mosque of Hassan II. Built on the water's edge, the mosque can accommodate 20,000 worshipers inside and another 80,000 outside in the mosaic-tiled courtyard. Its minaret juts more than 650 feet into the sky. Construction, completed in 1993, cost \$1 billion (U. S.) and required the labor of 2,500 people over more than 10 years.

In spite of the city's impressiveness, I can't ignore the evidence of abject poverty outside the city center. I'm told that local prostitution is unmatched in this part of the world except in Tangier. Or course, I've seen similar seediness in Western urban areas too.

I spend hours meandering around Morocco on trains and engaging in conversation a succession of bright young Muslim men, all called Muhammad. They instruct me in their faith and their perceptions of Christianity. Their sole allegiance is to Allah; their primary scripture is the Qur'an, revealed to the special messenger, Muhammad. Jesus is 1 of 124,000 prophets but ranks with the 9 who are "possessors of power." Submission to Allah is paramount and is expressed by five religious practices, or pillars. (*See "FYI," p. 17.*)

*I ask the young men about their attitude toward Christianity. They tell me that the Bible has been corrupted to conceal the coming of Muhammad. They are convinced that Christians worship three deities—God, Mary, and Jesus, who is patently not the Son of God.*

Indeed, Jesus did not die on the cross, they say. Perhaps the poor martyr was Judas Iscariot or Simon of Cyrene, saving Allah from embarrassment. Allah alone knows how he will deal with sin, but on the balance scale of justice one should weight good gestures, defined by Islamic moral code and obedience to the five pillars, over bad gestures.

One sin cannot be forgiven: associating another god with Allah. Therefore, Christians are beyond forgiveness.

With supreme confidence, my new friends tell me that the world is hurtling toward final confrontation between the true believers (themselves) and the infidels (Christians), a battle that will result in the total destruction of Christianity. Jesus will confess that He was never God.

As I listen with rapt attention, I love these men. Yet I sense the aching chasm between us. I can't offer them more intense discipline, greater commitment to a set of scriptures, more

prominent institutions, or superior passion. They have all of that. I realize that as far as religious exercises go, a good Muslim outperforms most of us Christians.

Yet, how I miss the note of grace, of assurance, of divine witness, of life guided by the Spirit who disarms fear, obligation, and arrogance! Holiness is better defined by the intimacy of the relationship with a personal God, by an utterly changed heart, and by what makes us rejoice and mourn than by a thousand dutiful practices. Here, perhaps, is where we begin to cross the divide.

As I look around Casablanca, I dare to pray, “Oh merciful, compassionate, and loving God, forgive us for those moments in history when Christianity did not act in a Christlike manner. May we learn to love our fellow human beings, even Muslims, in the way that You do. And may our example and testimony help point them toward Your eternal home.”

In the world’s tragic months since my visit to Casablanca, I keep hearing the divine whisper: “Pray it again, Sam!”



**Cali’s Christian Cartel**  
by Fletcher L. Tink

Colombia has endured the *Violencia*, 300,000 deaths over 20 years of political chaos, and now is battered by drug cartels in cahoots with revolutionaries. Private rightist militias fight back viciously. Each year, 35,000 citizens die violently. Another 3,000 people are kidnapped and held for ransom. One Nazarene pastor has been abducted three times; another was stabbed to death. The government seems paralyzed.

Miraculously, transformation is under way. I recently visited Cali, a sensual city of 3 million residents where coca is the primary crop. There I learned a different history.

Forty years ago, Billy Graham shared this vision about Cali: he saw three crosses on a hill and Christ the King standing on another hill, evidence that the city would someday experience revival. Twenty years ago, Cali had only 30 Protestant churches; today there are more than 600.

In 1991, a Bolivian missionary became so distraught by conditions in Cali—15 street murders a day—and discord among churches that he convened intercessors to pray for the city. The movement grew, and in 1995, 70,000 people gathered in and around a soccer stadium for an all-night vigil. Later that year, the missionary was gunned down. The prayer gatherings only

intensified. Forty-eight hours after one gathering, the local paper declared that Cali had gone a weekend without a homicide for the first time in recent history. Shortly thereafter, 7 drug lords were arrested, 900 corrupt policemen were fired, and the mayor declared that Jesus was Lord of Cali.

During my visit, I attended Casa de Oracion (“House of Prayer”) Church of the Nazarene. The church, which holds three Sunday services in its 900-seat sanctuary and is planning a fourth, was rocking with praise. I saw doctors, lawyers, professors, students, and hundreds of children. The worship team engaged us in salsa- and merengue-styled choruses. Pastors Adalberto and Nineye Herrera shared the pulpit, she proclaiming the week’s scriptural promise, he preaching on the prayer of Jabez. In that service, the morning’s second, 13 people accepted Christ; they joined 8 from the first service.

Seeking to understand such vibrancy, I interviewed church members. They cited eight reasons for the church’s growth:

**1. Prayer.** Adalberto says prayer is the church’s *pulmones*, its lungs, its life-giving breath. The Herreras started daily 6:00 A.M. prayer meetings in 1996 with a committed core of five. Nineye now leads daily prayer for 20 people at 4:00 A.M. By 6:00 A.M., 100 have assembled. On Wednesdays, more than 400 meet for an entire morning of prayer and fasting.

*Three outcomes result: First, intimacy and community develop. Second, the congregation sees signs and wonders daily. Third, they witness unconstrained grace devoid of human manipulation.*

**2. Signs and wonders.** Miracles abound. A doctor’s wife, first unable to have children and then beset with childbirth complications, showed me her baby; she is convinced God performs miracles. A señora, dancing with her tambourine, was once bedridden.

**3. Varied communication methods.** Through radio and television ministries and advertising, more than 100 inquiries arrive daily. Forty percent of newcomers are attracted by the multimedia messages.

**4. Desperation.** Personal tragedies, so common in Colombia, create openness. Lizbeth lost two sons and a son-in-law, all pilots, to aviation accidents, but as a result she turned to Christ. Her widowed daughter is already organizing a church in a distant town.

**5. Compassionate ministries.** On Saturday nights, 20 youth offer food and clothing to the homeless. They bring drug addicts to two church-run rehabilitation homes, one housing 40 and the other 25.

**6. Excellent, sustained leadership.** Pastor Adalberto admitted he had been neither baptized nor trained for the ministry. God overcame the obstacles.

**7. Networking.** Adalberto’s goal is not just local church renewal but a transformation in the very personality of Cali. He is actively involved in community associations and encourages

his congregation to participate in interchurch activities. Casa de Oracion often hosts interdenominational gatherings.

**8. Vision.** Already, the church has helped spawn 26 other congregations. Yet Adalberto believes that Casa de Oracion itself can grow to 5,000.

The Spanish word *calidad* means *quality*; in this Cali church I found incredible *calidad* from which we all could learn.



## PERPLEXED IN THE CITY

by Fletcher L. Tink

Istanbul perplexes me. This graceful city of 12 million people was for 800 years the crucible of Christianity. Its crowning achievement was the Cathedral of Haghia Sophia (Divine Wisdom), for nearly a millennium the largest Christian edifice in the world. In the fourth century, as he Christianized his expansive empire, Emperor Constantine himself changed the city's name from Byzantium to New Rome and then to Constantinople. Eastern Christianity and Constantinople were synonymous until 1453, when the city fell under Muslim domination and was renamed Istanbul.

What troubles me is that the city is almost devoid of Christian presence now. Yes, there are Christian historical ruins. But even Haghia Sophia was converted long ago into a mosque and then a museum. Among Turkey's 67 million people, perhaps only 2,000 are Christian. Half of those are Evangelicals clustered into 30 small churches. Even the presence of Eastern Orthodoxy is minuscule. One prelate confessed that his cathedral sees only 5 or 6 worshipers on any given Sunday, with maybe 100 on special religious days. Lumped together, the percentage of Christians in Turkey might be the tiniest of any nation in the world.

Yet, remarkably, Istanbul still retains its cultured and civilized soul. It obviously celebrates a brand of Islam more cosmopolitan than that practiced elsewhere. The secular government professes democracy; women are given equal rights; the army is both efficient and respected. During a recent visit, I walked late at night and felt unafraid. I found the people courteous and helpful. The streets seemed free of scam and seduction. I noted the jubilation of young families joining together for evening meals after the Ramadan fast. I observed the devout.

How did such a vibrant center of Christianity see its witness almost completely extinguished? Was the Christianity presented there a corrupt and perverted version that God spat out of His mouth? Or did Islam outmuscle and outmaneuver Christianity, eradicating its presence

in a battle for primacy? I refuse to stereotype history as the result of inept Christians or a failed God. Neither do I conclude that the Muslim faith is superior.

Rather, I have come to this insight. Constantinople was the center of an ongoing theological battle called the *filioque* controversy. Attempting to define the mysteries of the Triune God, the Eastern Church in the original Nicene Creed (A.D. 325) expressed the relationship of the Trinity by saying that “the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father.” The Western Church, centered in Rome, later altered the creed to state that the Holy Spirit proceeds also “from the Son” (*filioque*), thus implying subordination of the Spirit to the Son. The difference is that Eastern Christians believed the Holy Spirit could operate apart from the specific knowledge of Jesus Christ, a role of higher prominence than the Western Church attributed to the Spirit.

Could it be, then, that even in the absence of Christian churches the Holy Spirit is at work in what Wesleyans call prevenient grace, that “Light, which lighteth every man” (John 1:9, KJV)? Perhaps as Wesleyans we tilt more toward the Eastern concept than the Western, understanding that God operates within culture to restrain sin even when Christ is not known.

Perhaps the seeds of Christianity now dormant in Istanbul may someday bloom again. Indeed, the ordinary Turk confronts Christianity at every turn of historical reflection, admittedly rewritten to Muslim advantage. And the government invites Christian relief groups to express practical compassion and care after every natural disaster. Could someday that ancient message of Christianity, now languishing in a valley of dry religious bones, rise up and live again? In my wanderings, I did observe a fight on the street; I did hear that few marriages find happiness; I did learn about suppressed minorities. Behind the facade of culture and religion, is there restlessness?

The script is not about a city wrapped up in religious identity. It is about individuals carving out their lives under the religious framework offered to them. And perhaps 70 percent of them live out nothing more than the cultural symbols of Islam in a society now increasingly secularized. In the breezes of change, perhaps the Holy Spirit, reconnected to the Son, can begin to blow again. In that, I find Christian hope.

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## **Bethlehem Through Trifocal Lenses**

by Fletcher L. Tink

*“I wonder as I wander . . .”*

I stand in Shepherd’s Field near Bethlehem. The only flocks I see are flocks of tourists who follow their well-rehearsed guide down the scratchy trail onto the field.

The only radiant beams emanate from flash cameras that slap the twilight shadows. Ceramic shepherds huddle hauntingly within a dimly lit grotto. Inside, barred to us, are the mystical priestly rituals.

Recorded stereophonic “glories,” minus the angels, waft over to us from the cave. The Shepherd’s Chapel above, decorated with frescoes of the holy events, stirs more chitchat than excitement.

It all seems so tawdry compared to my anticipations. I look around hoping something eternal might interrupt the mundane.

Instead, I see on the horizon white walls of new high-rise apartment buildings under construction. They stand tall like infantrymen in file ready to march in victory over the remaining pastoral turf. Progress is relentless, and perhaps I am standing as the last generation on holy ground soon to be known as “Shepherd’s Square” or “No Man’s Land.” I am aware that just down the road at the heart of Christendom, three Christian religions joust for every square inch, every supposed artifact, of the Chapel of the Nativity. And Christmas itself is celebrated not once but three times a year to vindicate the religious traditions of each.

No longer Phillips Brooks’s “little town” lying still, Bethlehem is now an adolescent of 30,000 persons jostled by traffic jams and urban development.

*“For hate is strong and mocks the song . . .”*

The Israeli Merkava tanks crash into Manger Square, crushing like flatcakes everything in their path. Rockets and flares burst into the night sky while Palestinian gunmen clutching their Kalashnikovs scamper in all directions. Snipers take up posts on the tops of buildings, their rifle bores hunting the slightest motions. Israeli loudspeakers blare out a bullying cacophony of dog barks, cat fights, the grind of tire treads, and bursts of explosions. Guerrillas and grenades, combat helmets and flak jackets cast shifting shadows in the smoke-filled night air. Bethlehem is under siege, and the Church of the Nativity has become the unlikely sanctuary of gunmen, vandals, and priests. Within days, it becomes a ransacked repository where the stench of filthy bodies mingles with the reek of human waste. Snipers kill, monks plead, soldiers vandalize, politicians threaten, militants desecrate sacred space. And the mentally retarded ringer of the church bells is slain. It seems that in Bethlehem there is no everlasting light, no deep and dreamless sleep. This year, Phillips Brooks might rewrite his hymn, “How violently, how violently . . .”

*“Bless all the dear children . . . ”*

*I visit with our Nazarene missionaries Lindell and Kay Browning in Bethlehem. They tell a tale of divine visitation.*

It is the first *intifada* a dozen years ago. Lindell and Kay must make their daily run between Bethlehem and Jerusalem knowing that the yellow Israeli tags on the van invite the threat of stoning. One evening as they head back to Jerusalem with their nine-year-old son, Reuben, a grapefruit-size rock crashes through the rear side window and hits the lad in the back of the head. They rush him to an Israeli hospital. The head wound bleeds profusely, and Reuben becomes afraid, asking his dad if he is about to die. As the wound is stitched up, Lindell notes that his son is staring at his right hand, exercising his fingers. Thinking that maybe numbness has set in, he asks Reuben what’s wrong. Reuben responds, “Dad, you remember that once you said that whenever we feel afraid we should look at our right hand and think about the verse from Isaiah 41:13?” “For I am the LORD, your God, who takes hold of your right hand and says to you, Do not fear; I will help you.” It’s a verse Lindell had taught Reuben during the family’s earlier evacuation from the Gulf War.

In the calamity of pain and uncertainty, this Bethlehem child knew that God had secured him hand in hand. Oh, that Bethlehem and all of our troubled cities would stretch out their collective right hands for God to hold!

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Metropollinating is a publication of the  
**Bresee Institute for Metro Ministries**  
614 W. 39<sup>th</sup> St. Kansas City, MO 64119  
Phone: 816-931-9585  
[www.bimm.org](http://www.bimm.org)

