

Exegeting a Neighborhood

Derived from the V3 NETWORK

If we want to meaningfully connect with our neighborhood, we need to be able to read the city and neighborhood well. Exegeting a city or neighborhood is a basic task of a missionary, where you seek to “draw out” the meaning of a people and place in order to see the power of the gospel more fully transform the neighborhoods in which we live. When we live with a missionary mindset, like Paul, we will meaningfully walk around and live in our neighborhood, taking the time to observe what people consider most important (what they worship), what they fear, what they believe, and what they idolize.

Acts 17: 22-33 is one of the classic texts to exegeting a city. Take a moment to read through that passage, with the mindset to pick up clues to how Paul interacted with Athens and the people living there. Take special note to what he saw, what he felt and how he engaged the people. For when you engage in the work of exegeting a neighborhood within the context of the city, you will need to know what to look for, allow time to honestly respond to what you see, and find ways to interact with people of peace and others in the neighborhood.

One of the reasons we need to exegete the neighborhood and city to which we have been sent, is because we need to find the best way to take the whole gospel into the real context in which people are living. As Rene Padilla has said, “To contextualize the gospel is to translate it in

such a way that the Lordship of Jesus Christ is not an abstract principle or mere doctrine, but the determining factor of life in all its dimensions and that basic criterion in relation to which all cultural values that form the very substance of human life are evaluated. Without contextualization, the gospel will become tangential or even entirely irrelevant.”

Exegeting the Neighborhood within the City

So how do we go about reading our neighborhood within the context of our city? While neighborhoods within larger cities are quite different from one another, it is helpful to give some focus to the neighborhood within the city and the city itself. One of the ways to do this is by understanding the basic culture of the neighborhood and city. While there are many good ways to do this, I want to show you how to do this by looking at some of the key elements of the cultural web that I developed to understand the cultural of a congregation. For the same elements are essential to any culture, and can help us to discern the nature of our neighborhood within city.

In its most basic form, culture includes six elements – language, artifacts, narratives, rituals, institutions and ethics. These elements interrelate to create culture and make up what I call the “cultural web.”

To simplify things even further, there are four basic questions you can ask to gain a fairly good understanding of a particular neighborhood and/or city, based on the key elements of a culture.

- 1 (Narrative) What story is the city calling us to embody?
- 2 (Rituals) What is the core practices that people engage in which shape their identity and sense of mission in life?
- 3 (Institutions) What are the primary institutions that are shaping the city, and how are they shaping people's identity and destiny?
- 4 (Ethics) How would your neighborhood and/or city define success?

As a way to help you answer these four primary questions, we will dive a bit deeper into each element of culture and consider a number of other questions, with the goal of being able to answer these four primary questions with greater depth.

1. Narrative: What story is the neighborhood within the city calling us to embody?

When seeking to understand the narrative of a people, you need to consider what they believe about God, or if they believe in God (theology), what they believe with a sense of confidence (doctrines), and the (stories) that they tell each other, the stories that they live into based on the music they listen to, and the various kinds of media that to which the continually expose themselves.

Here are some questions that help us get to the heart of the overarching story that our city is calling us to embody.

- What are the key slogans of the city or neighborhood?
- What are the prime landmarks, and how do they shape the narrative of the neighborhood?
- What kind of music do people tend to listen to?
- What lyrics do they have committed to memory, and what story is that calling them into?
- What are people's favorite films and what lines can they quote by heart?
- What are people's dreams and hopes?
- What are their fears and stresses?

- What do people think about God, about Jesus, or about the church?
- What places of worship are in the neighborhood and what do they tell us about the neighborhood?
- How do people think about money and power?
- What are the idols of the neighborhood?
- Who has “played God” in the city and how has that shaped the cities story?
- What are important moments in the history of the city, or kairos moments in the life of the city or neighborhood?

2. Rituals: What is the core practices that people engage in which shape their identity and sense of mission in life?

To understand the life shaping rituals of the neighborhood within city, you need to observe the formal ceremonies that are fused with meaning that people engage in (rites), the common (practices) in which people routinely engage, and the everyday (liturgies) that people partake in that shape their ultimate desires, identity and sense of the good life.

Here are some questions that help us to understand the thick practices that people routinely engage.

- What activities do people engage in which give them a sense of worth?
- What holidays are celebrated with the most vigor?
- How are these holidays celebrated and in how do they shape people's ultimate desires?
- How do people approach their work, as a career or a calling?
- What do people do in their "free" time and how much "free" time do they have?
- Other than work, what do people devote the most time toward?
- What third spaces do people engage with the most?
- How do people spend their time, their money and their talents?

- In what ways do people seek to meet their need for beauty?
- Do people tend to work for the common good of the neighborhood or for their own good?

3. Institutions: What are the primary institutions that are shaping the city, and how are they shaping people's identity and destiny?

Institutions have certain (structures) that speak to the distribution of power and decision making, (systems) that either encourage the flourishing of the city or demise of the city, and (symbols) of success and failure that shape people's sense of worth.

- Which companies are the primary employers of the city?
- Do the primary employers look out for the common good of the city or their own good?
- Is the government centralized or decentralized giving power to the local neighborhoods?
- Does the police force look out for the underprivileged or add to the divisiveness of the city?
- Do the lawmakers and judges treat the people with fairness or with favoritism?
- How do the various institutions deal with immigrants as people made in the image of God or a problem?
- If there is gentrification happening in the neighborhood, are the displaced treated as full human beings?
- Who founded the hospitals, how do they operate and do people have equal access to health care as people made in God's image?

- Is it easy or difficult for small businesses to flourish in the city?
- Which institutions are caring for the homeless in a God honoring way?
- Are churches seeking to bring a greater sense of the kingdom to their neighborhood or looking out for themselves?
- What is the reputation of the religious leaders churches in the neighborhood?
- Who are the most powerful people in the city and do they promote justice or their own welfare?
- What are the most influential media institutions and how does their reporting influence people?
- What are the primary educational institutions and how are they shaping the life of the children and the city?
- Does everybody have equal opportunity when it comes to education?
- What are the significant universities in the city or neighborhood and in what ways are they influencing the people in the neighborhood?
- What is the built environment of the city (the cities approach to architecture, parks and sustainability), and does it add to the flourishing of the city or not?

4. Ethics: How would your city and/or neighborhood define success?

Ethics are the moral convictions that shape the life of community and speak to people's sense of (being), which in turn shape people's (doing). Ethics require space and time for people to engage in (reflecting) on their lives and their neighborhood, in order to examine if they are promoting the common good.

- Does the pace of life in the city aid or hinder people's ability to engage in solitude, silence and reflection?
- Does the built environment (design of the city, neighborhood) help people be fully human or add to agitation people feel?
- Does the art scene help people in the neighborhood and city to consider the important questions the community ought to address or add to the duress of the people?
- How do the primary modes of transportation shape people's sense of being?
- Who promotes and hinders justice in the neighborhood?
- How does the city shape people's conception of the good life?
- Does the city promote the "American dream" or God's vision for the future, and how does this shape people's imagination?

- Do the laws and enforcement of the laws help each person of the city, no matter what class or ethnicity they may be, feel like a person made in the image of God?
- Does the city's description of the "good life" cause people to consider others more important than themselves or to look out for number one?
- What behaviors are rewarded and what behaviors are punished?
- How does the city government budget reflect her understanding of success?

While this is not a comprehensive approach to exegeting the neighborhood within the city, by answering these four primary questions, you will have a greater ability to understand how to be the good news in your context. For the more we understand the culture of our neighborhood, the better we can bear witness in word and deed to our neighborhood, bring the transforming power of the gospel to our neighborhoods within our cities, and make the invisible kingdom more visible.