

INTRODUCTION

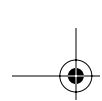
Suburbia—Paradise or Wasteland?

The suburban life is a spiritual quest.

I had been researching the topic of suburbia for well over a year before this idea crystallized in my mind. In recent years, new suburbs have emerged as edge cities, the new metropolises that stand independently outside older cities in places that just a decade ago were often empty farmland or desert. These suburbs are the latest version of the promise of the American frontier—blank slates on which new residents can write their stories. The pioneers who move to these suburbs “have made a startling leap into the unknown,” writes commentator David Brooks. “The places have no past, no precedent, no settled conventions. The residents have no families or connections here.”¹ But people move here with the hope that there soon will be communities and relationships developed among people in the same boat as themselves. Fellow pilgrims on the journey, as it were.

I was struck by the significance of suburban living as a spiritual quest or pilgrimage. We’re all here looking for something. People live in suburbia for any number of reasons. We may have come here because of a job change or for a relationship. We come in search of affordable housing, good schools or safe communities. Or we may have grown up in suburbia by default; indeed, over half of the American population now lives in suburbia, and many of us have been suburbanites for two or





three generations. Whatever the case, we who live in suburbia have aspirations for a certain kind of life. For some it is an optimistic vision, while others may be more cynical about ever seeing such a life come to be. But it is still a spiritual longing in either case.

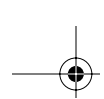
Even those who come to suburbia for less than noble reasons do so out of a particular vision of their ideal life. Some move to suburbia out of fear of those unlike them, fleeing from racial diversity and searching for a place “safer” and more comfortable to their preexisting prejudices. Others care little for their neighbors and fashion suburban lives of self-centered materialism, acquisition of possessions and status climbing. These too point to spiritual needs, however misguided or impure the motivations might be.

Whenever people describe suburbia, invariably they use phrases like “a good place to raise kids” or “where people settle down and start a family.” Inherent in these comments is an aspiration of hope for their future and a dream of a good life for their children. In other words, suburbia is the context and the setting for the fulfillment of people’s hopes and dreams.

The very geography of suburbia, especially new development, provides people with the opportunity for a fresh start, a second chance. For the recent college graduate, the new divorcee, the refugee and immigrant, the suddenly widowed or downsized or retired, a move to or within suburbia represents the search for another life. It is a contemporary version of the huddled masses yearning to breathe free. It is as if today’s transient, mobile population is taking heed of the words of the apostle Paul: forgetting what is behind, straining toward what is ahead. The old is gone, the new is come. Suburbia can be seen as a place for redemption from the past and of hope for the future.

What is the suburban dream? What do the suburbs offer? Respite from wandering in the wilderness and the possibility of a promised land, perhaps. Historians Rosalyn Baxandall and Elizabeth Ewen observe:





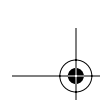
The suburbs had always promised prosperity, upward mobility, a healthy life in an unpolluted environment, safety and tranquility, and above all, the best place to bring up kids. Although this promise still fuels many dreams and infuses a nostalgic political rhetoric, the future is in doubt. Although most Americans today live in the suburbs, the elements of the covenant are elusive. What remains for many is a sense of quiet despair and faint hope.²

A mix of despair and hope is as good as any description of the suburban ethos. We are here in suburbia because we have some notion that it's a good place to be, but we are beginning to question exactly how good it is for us. We find ourselves experiencing a kind of suburban ambivalence.

It seems that much of what we long for in life, whether community and family, security and shelter, love and happiness, or meaning and purpose, is embodied somewhere in the suburban landscape. Looking for friends? There are people here by the millions. Searching for a place to call home? Subdivisions as far as the eye can see. Need work to do? Plenty of jobs in suburbia. Want material stuff? Anything you can imagine is at a mall or big-box store near you. It's all here.

Yet many of us still haven't found what we're looking for. Instead of an idyllic paradise or restful haven, suburban living is often hectic and frazzled. Instead of a place of community, suburbia is often anonymous and isolated. We find ourselves frustrated with our commutes, lacking time with friends and family, trapped by debt and consumerism. The suburban world, far from an Edenic garden or American dream, often seems to be more of a fallen world. *Utopia* literally means "no place," and it may seem like the suburban utopia is nowhere to be found. Living in such a material environment, we begin to suspect that suburbia may be detrimental to our spiritual lives. We feel spiritually impoverished in the midst of this land of plenty. Can we truly experience God in the suburbs? Is it possible to live authentic Christian lives as suburban Christians?





THE LEGITIMACY OF SUBURBAN LIVING

Suburban residents sometimes find themselves caught between both urban and rural ideals. On the one hand, suburbia can be seen as inferior to the urbane, cosmopolitan, cultured world of life in the big city. On the other hand, compared to the pristine wilderness and natural beauty of rural settings, suburbia can seem artificial, plastic and shallow. Either way, suburbia comes up short.

Christianity Today once ran a cover story called “Suburban Spirituality.” The article raised some thought-provoking observations about the spiritual challenges of suburban life. More jarring, however, were the letters to the editor that ran a few issues later. For example, one person wrote:

The Christian life is about divestiture, not acquisition. It is the laying aside of every weight in order to run the race. You can do this in the city or the wilderness, but in the affluent suburbs, it can be done only in the most enfeebled and rudimentary way. The final irony is that many young Christians move to the suburbs and take on suffocating commutes and mortgages for the benefit of their children. This amounts to placing children at the very epicenter of the world’s value system—materialism—and then expecting to grow a Christian child.³

Another letter writer likewise wrote, “The fact is that the suburbs are Prozac for the soul. Can you really be intimate with the living God when your senses are dulled, your time is not your own, and the cost to stay in the game keeps mounting? I’m not so sure.”⁴

Is this true? Was my spiritual health endangered merely by living in the suburbs? Suburbia certainly affects its dwellers in myriad unnoticed ways, but these letter writers were essentially saying that suburbia is antithetical to the Christian life. They implied that suburban Christians are more shallow, vapid or materialistic than other Christians. If they were correct, then I cannot fully live out the Christian life as an authentic follower of Jesus, just because I happen to live in suburbia.

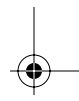
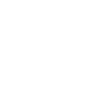


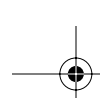


While raising some good points, these letter writers were critiquing a particular kind of suburban life without being open to the possibility that true Christians could indeed live faithfully in suburbia. I felt somewhat defensive and took their comments personally because I have always lived in suburbia. I was born in one of New York City's boroughs and grew up in a suburb of Minneapolis. I now live in the western suburbs of Chicago. It's the air I breathe, and like many other suburbanites I have something of a love-hate relationship with the suburbs. For better and for worse, I am a suburbanite. It's who I am, how I see life, how I experience the world.

Behind the readers' comments is a tacit assumption that the Christian life simply can't be lived in certain environments. While it is certainly true that different settings will lead to differences in how the Christian life is lived, we should not assume that faithful Christian living in the suburbs is by definition impossible. Rather, the challenge for suburban Christians is to discern how they might avoid the pitfalls of suburban life and be authentic Christians in this very setting. Just as Christians have struggled to be faithful to God wherever they have been—in Jerusalem or Rome, in medieval or colonial times, in agrarian or industrial societies, in urban centers or on the wild frontier—so too must Christians develop a thoroughly Christian approach to living in contemporary suburbia. The suburban Christian ought not uncritically absorb all the characteristics of the suburban world but rather should thoughtfully assess and discern how Christians ought to live in this environment, without either capitulating to the culture or abandoning it by fleeing the suburbs and relocating to the country.

Indeed the problems and challenges of suburban living are significant, as the following chapters will explore. But for Christians, nothing is beyond redemption. Over the past few years I have increasingly realized that suburbia has affected me in ways I am only beginning to understand. There's no escaping that suburbia has profoundly shaped who I am, and more specifically, *suburbia has shaped my Christian experience*. I





understand my faith differently than I would have if I had grown up in rural or urban settings. As we examine how suburbia has influenced our Christian practice for good and for ill, we will consider ways that Christians can redeem the suburbs. How has suburbia shaped our Christianity, and how might Christianity shape the suburbs?

Given that so many Christians dwell in the suburbs, we can take hope in the possibility that suburbs can become key centers of vibrant Christian faith and life. Suburbs are neither to be avoided nor to be preferred. Just as Christians are present in both rural and urban settings, I will simply take as a given that Christians are likewise present in suburbia and *should* be present in suburbia. Thus we need to develop a Christian perspective to suburban living.

I should say at the outset that my scope is necessarily selective. Suburbia is a huge, complex topic, and multiple books have been written on each of the various issues in this book. So I don't claim to be exhaustive or to have the authoritative word on suburbia. I'm not a professional sociologist or cultural analyst, just a fellow suburbanite wanting to make sense of our world. My task has been to read and distill some of the existing literature and research on suburbia so you don't have to tackle it all yourself.

So let's examine suburbia with some of the tools that sociologists, historians, cultural anthropologists and missiologists use to understand a culture. What makes suburbs tick? Why are they the way they are? What are suburban people like? What does it mean to be a suburban Christian? And how might Christian faith contextualize itself in such a way as to be compelling to suburbanites without getting sucked into the trapings and temptations of suburban living?

If you are interested in these kinds of questions, welcome. Consider this a Christian guided tour of suburbia. We'll look beyond the stereotypes of suburbia as either shallow wasteland or utopian paradise and instead reckon with both the opportunities and challenges facing suburban Christians. May this suburban safari be helpful to you in your spiritual pilgrimage.

