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Worse Than You Think

by James M. Decker

In my last essay, I continued my series inspired by pastor Stephen Witmer's book, "A Big Gospel in Small Places: Why Ministry in Forgotten Communities Matters." My essay, and Witmer's book, conclude that small places are better than we think, because God sees them as far more valuable and important than modern society does.

But small places are also worse than we think.

You probably didn't expect that from me, given my perennial optimism and championing of rural life, so go ahead and read it again. It's not a typo.

Small places are often derided by the world as unimportant. However, they are also often idealized. This problem dates back thousands of years. Witmer notes that Roman poets often wrote of the Roman countryside as a literary utopia, the home of virtue, industry, and stability, as opposed to the dirty, immoral cities. Witmer compares that to the themes of modern country music, where country life is also often idealized. I could write an entire treatise on the misguided themes of what passes as modern country music, but that's an essay for a different day.

It's a Mayberry-ization of rural life, pretending that we live in the Andy Griffith Show. This

is not a new phenomenon. Witmer cites a letter written in 1802(!) by a woman from Maine named Eliza Southgate who told a friend, "our novelists have worn the pleasures of rural life threadbare." Listening to those country music sounds, it's clear that we've only gotten more threadbare. But why does society do this?

Witmer quotes rural demographer Calvin Beale, who found that "the countryside was a time machine in which urbanites could see the living past, and feel nostalgic or superior, as the sight inclined them." Witmer points out that evangelical Christians are just as guilty, contrasting their mission work in the sinful, complex cities to life in peaceful, simple rural America, where nothing bad ever happens.

Rural Americans idealize our small places too. Reading this chapter of Witmer's book was a bit of a gut punch for me. He quotes essayist Kathleen Norris, who wrote that small towns on the Dakota plains idealized their isolation to contrast their idyllic life with the bad world outside. As a West Texan, I've often idealized the perils of living here, where extreme weather is common and seemingly every native plant and animal is full of thorns or poison.

But here's the problem: you can't fix something that you idealize.

Rural folks mythologize our small places because it makes feel good about living here. City folks mythologize rural America out of both nostalgia and superiority. Both are wrong. Idealization ignores the reality that, as Witmer writes, rural America is a complex, broken place full of sin and despair. In that respect, rural America is just like the cities, suburbs, and every other place on earth.

We know what this brokenness is. Deaths from drug overdoses are higher in rural America. As rural populations decline, more of rural America becomes classified as a "food desert," (defined as living 10 or miles from the nearest full-service grocery store or supermarket). We fight the "brain drain," young people moving away and never returning. We struggle to provide good, quality jobs and economic opportunities in our communities. Our government entities have less money to provide necessary services.

Believing the mythology is naïve and dangerous, because it makes it more difficult to fix these issues. Why spend your time and energy repairing something that doesn't need fixing? Pastor Witmer writes a beautiful line that sticks with me: "we will not fruitfully serve what we idealize."

This is not an either-or proposition. Small places are simultaneously better AND worse than we think. Witmer cites esteemed pastor Tim Keller in writing that this is a reminder that in God's eyes, we are simultaneously both sinful AND worth saving.

We cannot despair by dwelling on the negative, nor should we naïvely ignore our challenges. Here's the ultimate reality: our rural places are both broken AND worth saving.

James Decker is a lawyer,



Candidate Visit! August Pfluger, Republican candidate for the Texas District 11 US Representative, visited Bronte on Wednesday, January 29, 2020. He spoke to community members at the Blue Goose in downtown Bronte. Pfluger is running for the seat that is open due to the retirement of Mike Conaway.

farmer, and mayor in Stamford, 98"podcast and website. He may be contacted through Facebook at facebook.com/james.decker.

Area Churches Invite You to Worship

Bronte

Bronte Church of Christ

PO Box 346
118 S. Jefferson • Bronte
Sun. 10 am & 6 pm, Wed. 7 pm
Central Baptist Church
324 S. Franklin • Bronte
(325) 473-4811
Dale Patterson, Pastor
Sun. 10 am Sunday School
11 am & 5 pm Worship

First Baptist Church

424 S. Washington • Bronte
(325) 473-2331 • Pastor George Cooper
Sunday 9:45 am Sunday School,
10:55 am Worship, 6 pm Bible
Study & Worship
Wednesday 6 pm RA's & GA's,
6:30 pm Youth & Adults

First United Methodist Church

Corner of Washington & Holmes
Bronte
(325) 473-3281
Rev. Stacy Sprinkle, Pastor
Sun. 10:00 am Sunday School
11:00 am Worship

Forgiven Ministries

117 W. Main, Bronte
Russ Frasier, Pastor
Sun. 10 am
Tuesday 6 pm Table Time

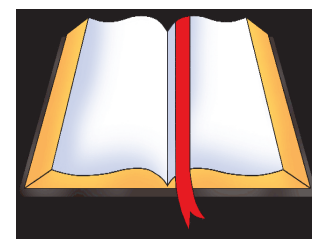
St. James Catholic Church

215 N. Washington, Bronte
(325) 365-2687
Rev. Yesu Mulakaleti, Jr., Pastor
Sunday Bilingual Mass 8 am
4C Cowboy Church
Texas Theater, Downtown Bronte
Interim Pastor Robert Lemmond
Sunday, 10:30 am

Coke County

Pecan Baptist

PO Box 542 • 12 miles West of
Robert Lee on Sterling City Hwy
(325) 453-2065, Bill Hood, Pastor
www.pecanbaptistchurchrl.com
Sun. 10 am, Sunday School
11 am & 7 pm, Worship



Robert Lee

Bible Baptist Church

PO Box 938 • 9th & Austin
Robert Lee
Sunday 10 am Sunday School, 11 am and
5 pm Worship, Wed 5 pm Bible Study

Emmanuel Pentecostal

PO Box 683 • 1019 Colorado City Hwy
Pastor Kevin Millstid 453-2360
Sundays 10 am, Wednesdays 7 pm

First United Methodist Church

PO Box 144 • 9th & Chadbourne
Robert Lee • (325) 453-2417
Cyndi Weidner, Pastor
Sun. 10 am Sunday School
11 am Worship, 5 pm Choir Practice

Iglesia Bautista Betel

101 Houston • Robert Lee
Sun. 9:45 am • Sunday School
11 am Service • Bible Study Wed. 6 pm

Southside Church of Christ

PO Box 698 • 8th & Houston
Robert Lee (325) 453-2176
Recardo Reyes, Preacher
Sun. 10 am, Sunday School
11 am & 6 pm, Worship

Wed. 6 pm, Worship

Northside Church of Christ

PO Box 508
9th & Chadbourne • Robert Lee
(325) 453-2685, (325) 763-2118 or
(325) 473-1053
Services: Sun. 10 am

Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church

601 W. 10th, Robert Lee
(325) 365-2687
Rev. Yesu Mulakaleti, Pastor
Saturday Vigil Mass 5 pm
Robert Lee Baptist Church
PO Box 493 • 22 W. 11th
(325) 453-2724
Chris Walls, Pastor
Sun. 9:45 am, Sunday School
11 am & 7 pm, Worship
Wed. 7 pm, Prayer Meeting

Victory Assembly of God

(325) 453-2208, PO Box 638
6th & Houston, Robert Lee
Rev. Irving Smith, Pastor
Sun. 9:45 am, Sunday School
10:45 am & 6 pm, Worship
Wed. 6 pm, Bible Study

Tennyson

Tennyson Baptist Church
Hwy 277 • Tennyson
(325) 473-2040
Sun. 9:45 am, Sunday School
11:00 am & 6 pm, Worship
Wed. 6:00 pm Prayer Meeting

Russell Davis

Agent

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