

What Is God's Global Urban Mission?

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What is a city?

Today, a city is defined almost exclusively in terms of population size. Larger population centers are called "cities," smaller ones "towns," and the smallest are "villages." We must not impose our current usage on the biblical term, however. The main Hebrew word for city, *iyir*, means any human settlement surrounded by some fortification or wall. Most ancient cities numbered only about 1,000-3,000 in population. "City" in the Bible meant not so much population size as density. Psalm 122:3 refers to this density: "Jerusalem, built as a city should be, closely compact."¹ The word translated "compact" meant to be closely intertwined and joined. In a fortified city, the people lived close to one another in tightly compacted houses and streets. In fact, most ancient cities were estimated to be five to ten acres, with 240 residents per acre. By comparison, contemporary Manhattan in New York City houses only 105 residents per acre.²

In ancient times, then, a city was what would today be called a "mixed use" walkable human settlement. Because of the population's density, there were places to live and work, to buy and sell, to pursue and enjoy art, to worship and to seek justice; all within an easy walk. In ancient times, rural areas and villages could not provide all these elements, and in our modern time, the "suburb" deliberately avoids this settlement pattern. Suburbs are definitively dedicated to single-use zones; so places to live, work, play, and learn are separated from one another and are reachable only by car, usually through pedestrian-hostile zones.

What makes a city a city is proximity. It brings people; and therefore residences, workplaces, and cultural institutions; together. It creates street life and marketplaces, bringing about more person-to-person interactions and exchanges in a day than are possible anywhere else. This is what the Biblical writers meant when they talked about a "city."

Urban Mission in the Bible

Jerusalem

Earlier in the Old Testament, the redemptive importance of the city lay in Jerusalem itself being a model urban society; "the joy of the whole earth" (Ps. 48:2); demonstrating to the world what human life under his lordship could be. Many have spoken of the "centripetal" flow of mission during this era. God called the nations to believe in him by drawing them in to see his glory embodied in Israel, the holy nation he had created, whose corporate life showed the world the character of God (Deut 4:5-8). However, the book of Jonah stunningly foreshadows a major change, the "centrifugal" New Testament mission of sending believers out into the world. Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet sent to a pagan city to call it to repentance. God's final statement is striking: the Lord calls Jonah to love the great pagan city of Nineveh because of the vast number of its spiritually blind inhabitants (Jonah 4:10-11).

Babylon

This movement from centripetal to centrifugal reaches another stage when Israel is taken into exile.

The Jews are taken to live in the wicked, pagan, bloodthirsty city of Babylon. What is the relationship of believers to such a place? Jeremiah 28-29 holds out a remarkable outline for a believer's stance toward the city. God tells his people to "Increase; do not decrease" (Jer. 29:6) to keep their distinct community identity and to grow, but he also tells them to settle down and engage in the life of the great city. They are to build homes and plant gardens. Most striking of all, God calls them to serve the city, to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" and to "Pray to the LORD for it" (Jer. 29:7). They are not simply to increase their tribe in a ghetto within the city but are to use their resources to benefit the common good.

This is quite a balance! The values of an earthly city contrast sharply with those of the city of God, yet citizens of the city of God must be the very best citizens of their earthly cities. God calls the Jewish exiles to serve the common good of the pagan city. He also has a very practical goal: serving the good of the pagan city is the best possible way for the people of God to thrive and flourish; "if it prospers, you too will prosper" (Jer. 29:7). God is still concerned with his plan of salvation, the establishment of his people; and that is exactly what happened. Because the Jews moved in and sought the peace of the great pagan city, they accumulated the influence and leverage needed to eventually return and restore their homeland. Also Jews remained somewhat dispersed throughout the cities of the world as a cosmopolitan, international ethnic group that became a crucial base for the spread of the Christian message after Jesus.

Resident Aliens

Is there any reason to believe that the model for Israel in Babylon should serve as the model for the church? Yes. In exile, Israel no longer existed in the form of a nation-state with its own government and laws. Instead it existed as an international community and counterculture within other nations. This is also now the form of the church, as Peter and James acknowledge when addressing believers as "the dispersion" (James 1:1) and "exiles" (1 Peter 1:1). Twice Peter uses *parapidemois* as a word for exiles; "resident aliens"; people who live in a country neither as natives nor as tourists passing through. Peter calls Christians to live in the midst of pagan society in such a way that others see their "good deeds and glorify God" but warns them to expect persecution, nonetheless (1 Peter 2:11-12). The echoes of Jeremiah 29 are evident. Like the Jewish exiles, Christian exiles are to engage in their cities, serving the common good rather than conquering or ignoring them. They should expect that the society around them will be both hostile and attracted by believers' lives and service in the city. Peter indicates that believers' good deeds will lead at least some pagans to glorify God.

In "Soft Difference," his article on 1 Peter, Miroslav Volf shows how the tension Peter envisioned (between persecution and attraction, and between evangelism and service) does not fit neatly into any of the historic models of relating Christ to culture.³ Unlike models that call for a transformation of culture or that call for a Christendom-like alliance of church and state, Peter expects the gospel to always be highly offensive, never completely embraced or accepted by the world. This is a caution to those evangelicals and mainline Christians who hope to bring about an essentially Christian culture. And unlike models that call solely for evangelism and are highly pessimistic about influencing culture, both Peter in 1 Peter 2:12 and Jesus in Matt 5:16 expects some aspects of Christian faith and practice to be highly attractive in any pagan culture, influencing people to praise and glorify God.⁴

Samaria and the uttermost parts of the earth

The church lives as an international, dispersed fellowship of congregations, as Israel did under the exile. In Acts 8, we see God forcibly dispersing the Christians from Jerusalem, thus boosting Christian mission enormously. They immediately went to Samaria, a city that Jewish people would have been taught to despise as much as Jonah despised Nineveh or the Jews despised Babylon. But unlike the reluctant prophet or exiles, the gospel-changed Christians made them immediately effectively in urban mission in Samaria (Acts 8:1ff.)

When we finally come to the early church, we see God's redemptive mission no longer centers on

any particular city such as Jerusalem, or on Babylon. All the cities of the world become crucial. In Acts 17, Paul goes to Athens, the intellectual center of the Greco-Roman world. In Acts 18, he travels to Corinth, one of the commercial centers of the empire. In Acts 19, he arrives in Ephesus, perhaps the Roman world's religious center as the hub of many pagan cults and particularly of the imperial cult, with three temples for emperor worship. By the end of Acts, Paul makes it to Rome, the empire's power capital, the military and political center of that world. John Stott concludes: "It seems to have been Paul's deliberate policy to move purposefully from one strategic city-centre to the next."⁵ By reaching the city, Paul reached the whole society, as evidenced in the letter to the Colossians. In this epistle, Paul follows up disciples in cities along the Lycus Valley; Laodicea, Hierapolis, Colossae (Col. 4:13-16); even though he had never visited those places personally. They were likely converted through the Ephesian ministry. If the gospel is unfolded at the urban center, you reach the region and the society.

The reasons urban ministry was so effective can be summarized as follows: Cities are culturally crucial. In the village, someone might win one or two lawyers to Christ, but winning the legal profession requires going to the city with the law schools, the law journal publishers, and so on. Cities are globally crucial. In the village, someone can win only the single people group living there, but spreading the gospel to ten or twenty new national groups/languages at once requires going to the city, where they can all be reached through the one lingua franca of the place. Cities are personally crucial. By this I mean that cities are disturbing places. The countryside and the village are marked by stability and residents are more set in their ways. Because of the diversity and intensity of the cities, urbanites are much more open to new ideas; such as the gospel! Because they are surrounded by so many people like and unlike themselves, and are so much more mobile, urbanites are far more open to change/conversion than any other kind of resident. Regardless of why they may have moved to the city, once they arrive there the pressure and diversity make even the most traditional and hostile people open to the gospel.

The early church was largely an urban movement that won the people of the Roman cities to Christ, while most of the countryside remained pagan. Because the Christian faith captured the cities, however, it eventually captured the society, as must always be the case. Rodney Stark develops this idea in *The Rise of Christianity*.

"To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with widows and orphans, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity.... People had been enduring catastrophes for centuries without the aid of Christian theology or social structures. Hence I am by no means suggesting that the misery of the ancient world caused the advent of Christianity. What I am going to argue is that once Christianity did appear, its superior capacity for meeting these chronic problems soon became evident and played a major role in its ultimate triumph... [for what Christians] brought was not simply an urban movement, but a new culture"⁶.

Christian mission won the ancient Greco-Roman world because it won the cities.⁷ The elites were of course important, but the Christian church did not focus on them alone. Then, as now, cities were filled with the poor, and the urban Christians' commitment to the poor was visible and striking. Through the cities, Christians changed history and culture by winning the elites as well as identifying deeply with the poor. Richard Fletcher, in *The Barbarian Conversion*, shows the same thing occurred during the Christian mission to Europe from 500-1500 A.D. ⁸.

Urban Mission Today

The growing importance of cities

In 1950 New York and London were the only world cities with metro-area populations of over 10 million people. ⁹ Today, however, there are more than twenty such cities; twelve of which achieved that ranking in the last two decades ¹⁰ - with many more to come. World cities are becoming more

and more economically and culturally powerful; Cities are the seats of multinational corporations and international economic, social, and technological networks. The technology/communication revolution means that the culture and values of global cities are now being transmitted around the globe to every tongue, tribe, people, and nation. Kids in Iowa or even Mexico are becoming more like young adults in Los Angeles and New York City than they are like adults in their own locales. The coming world order will be a global, multicultural, urban order. World cities are increasingly crucial in setting the course of culture and life as a whole, even in areas of the world, such as Europe and North America, where cities are not literally growing in size.¹¹

There is a second reason that world cities are so important to the Christian mission. The millions of newcomers in burgeoning cities have characteristics that make them far more open to the Christian faith than they were before arriving. First, they are more open to new ideas, and to change in general, after being uprooted from traditional settings. Second, they greatly need help and support to face the moral, economic, emotional, and spiritual pressures of city life. The old kinship support networks of the rural areas are weak or absent, while in the developing world often have "nothing in working government services."¹² On the other hand, churches offer supportive community, a new spiritual family, and a liberating gospel message. "Rich pickings await any groups who can meet these needs of these new urbanites, anyone who can at once feed the body and nourish the soul." ¹³

The need for contextual churches.

However, there is a great barrier to urban mission that is not in the cities themselves nor in urban residents, but in the church. The sensibilities of most evangelical churches and leaders are often non- or even anti-urban. Many ministry methods have been forged outside of urban areas and then simply imported, with little thought to the unnecessary barriers this erects between urban dwellers and the gospel. When such ministers go into a city and set up ministry, they find it hard to evangelize and win urban people. They also find it difficult to prepare Christians for life in a pluralistic, secular, culturally engaged setting. Just as the Bible needs to be translated into readers' vernacular, so the gospel needs to be embodied and communicated in ways that are understandable to the residents of a city. What are some of the characteristics of a church that is contextualized and indigenous to a city?

People in urban ministry are aware of the sharp cultural differences between different racial/ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes, while people living in more homogeneous places (and everywhere is more culturally homogeneous than a big city) are often blind to how many of their attitudes and customs are very particular to their race and class. In short, effective urban church leaders must be far more educated and aware of the views and sensitivities of different ethnic groups, classes, races, and religions. Urbanites know how often members of two different racial groups can use the identical word to mean very different things. Consequently, they are very circumspect and careful when approaching issues that racial groups see very differently.

Second, traditional evangelical ministries tend to give believers relatively little help in understanding how they can maintain their Christian practice outside the walls of the church while still participating in the world of the arts and theatre, business and finance, scholarship and learning, and government and public policy. Away from big cities, it may be more possible to live one's life in compartments, with Christian discipleship largely consisting of activities done in the evenings or on the weekend. That doesn't work in cities, where people live most of their lives in the careers or the long work-hours of their jobs.

Third, most evangelical churches are middle-class in their corporate culture. People value privacy, safety, homogeneity, sentimentality, space, order, and control. In contrast, the city is filled with ironic, edgy, diversity-loving people who have a much higher tolerance for ambiguity and disorder. If a church's ministers cannot function in an urban culture, but instead create a kind of non-urban "missionary compound" within it, they will discover they cannot reach out, convert, or incorporate many people in their neighborhoods.

Fourth, the non-urban church is ordinarily situated in a fairly functional neighborhood, where social systems are strong or at least intact. Urban neighborhoods are vastly more complex than other kinds, however, so effective urban ministers learn how to exegete these neighborhoods. Also, urban churches do not exegete their neighborhoods simply to target people groups for evangelism, though that is one of their goals. They look for ways to strengthen the health of their neighborhoods, making them safer and more humane places for people to live. This is seeking the welfare of the city, in the spirit of Jeremiah 29.

Traditional liberal churches often perceive mission strictly in terms of social improvement. Their goal is to make the city a more just and humane society, by working for economic and social justice and for the common good. This is partly right. Traditional conservative churches often perceive mission strictly in terms of church growth. Their goal is to grow and increase the church of God within the city, by increasing the number of conversions and thus the power of the churches. This is partly right. These two things, however, must be combined because either of them alone will wither. You can't really serve the city without a constant stream of new converts, changed and empowered by an experience of grace, the new birth. On the other hand, church growth will come to a screeching halt if churches are filled with people who ignore or are hostile to the common good of their neighbors. A church that only "does good" to the household of faith, and not to "all" (Gal 6:10) will be (rightly!) seen as tribal and sectarian. If pagans don't "see your good deeds" they won't "glorify God," or at least not in the same proportions. Ironically, if urban churches put all their energy into evangelism and none serving the needs of the city, their evangelism will be much less effective. An experience of grace inevitably leads to a life poured out in deeds of service to the needy (Is 1:10-18; 58:1-10; James 2:14-17). God tells the Israelites that they should serve the needs of the poor "alien"; a foreigner who may be a non-believer; because they were once aliens in Egypt, but he delivered them (Deut 10:19). An experience of grace should always lead you to love especially your poor, unbelieving neighbor.

Biblically, an experience of saving grace through evangelism leads to radical sharing of wealth and helping the needy. And when the world sees this sharing, that there is "no needy among them," (Acts 4:34) it leads to more powerful evangelistic witness (Acts 4:33). Thus doing justice and preaching grace go hand in hand, not only in the experience of the individual Christian but also in the ministry and effectiveness of the urban church.

It takes a movement to reach a city Reaching an entire city takes more than having "some effective churches in it or even having a burst of revival energy and new converts. To change a city with the gospel takes a self-sustaining, naturally growing movement of ministries and networks around a core of new church multiplication.

What does that look like? Christians live in the city in a posture of service. New businesses and nonprofits renew their slices of culture in large and small ways. Believers integrate their faith with their work so that every vocation becomes a kingdom activity. Campus ministries and other evangelistic agencies organically produce new Christian leaders who stay in the city and move into the churches and networks. People use their power, wealth, and influence for the good of others on the margins of society, to advance ministry, and to plant new churches. Churches and individual Christians support and commission the arts. Let's break this down. New churches form the heart of these gospel ecosystems. They provide spiritual oxygen to the communities and networks of Christians who do the heavy lifting, over decades, to renew and redeem cities. They are the primary venue for discipleship and the multiplication of believers, as well as being the financial engine for all the ministry initiatives. This ecosystem is, therefore, a critical mass of new churches. They must be gospel-centered, urban, missional /evangelistic, balanced, growing, and self-replicating in diverse forms, across traditions, integrating races/classes. This is the most basic core of the ecosystem. The ecosystem also fosters networks and systems of evangelism that reach specific populations. In addition to campus ministries, which are especially important as a new leader development engine, other very effective, specialized evangelistic agencies are usually necessary to reach the elites, reach the poor, and reach Muslim, Hindu, and other particular cultural/religious groupings. Networks

and organizations of cultural leaders within professional fields, such as business, government, academia, and the arts and media, are part of this ecosystem, as well. It is crucial that these individuals be active in churches that thoughtfully disciple and support them for public life. These leaders must also network and support each other within their own fields, spawning new cultural institutions and schools of thought. The ecosystem is also marked by agencies and initiatives produced by Christians to serve the peace of the city, and especially the poor. Hundreds and thousands of new non-profit and for-profit companies must be spawned to serve every neighborhood and every population in need. United and coordinated church alliances and institutions also serve Christian families and individuals and support their long-term life in the city (e.g., schools, theological colleges, and other institutions that make city living sustainable for Christians over the generations). Additionally, this ecosystem has overlapping networks of city leaders. Church movement leaders, theologians/teachers, heads of institutions, and cultural leaders and patrons with influence and resources know one another and provide vision and direction for the whole city.

Tipping points Isolated events or individual entities crystallize into a growing, self-sustaining movement when they reach a ?tipping point.?

The gospel movement tipping point. A church planting project becomes a movement when the ecosystem elements are all in place and most of the churches have the vitality, leaders, and mindset to plant another church within five to six years of their own beginnings. When the tipping point is reached, a self-sustaining movement begins. Enough new believers, leaders, congregations, and ministries are being naturally produced for the movement to grow without any single command-and-control center. The body of Christ in the city funds itself, produces its own leaders, and conducts its own training. A sufficient number of dynamic leaders is always rising up. The number of Christians and churches doubles every seven to ten years. How many churches must be reached for this to occur? While it is impossible to give a number that would hold for every city and culture, all the elements in the ecosystem must be in place and very strong.

The city tipping point. A gospel movement tipping point is an important goal. But there is another. When a gospel movement tipping point is reached, it may be that the eco-system grows the Body of Christ to the point that whole-city tipping point is reached. That is the moment when the number of gospel-shaped Christians in a city becomes so large that Christian influence on the civic and social life of the city?;and on the very culture?;is recognizable and acknowledged. For example, neighborhoods stay largely the same if new types of residents (richer, poorer, or culturally different from the rest) comprise less than 5 percent of the population. Some prison ministers report that if more than 10% of the inmates become Christians, it changes the corporate culture of the prison. The relationships between prisoners, between prisoners and guards?;all change. Likewise, when the number of new residents reaches somewhere between 5 and 20 percent, depending on the culture, the whole neighborhood ethos shifts. In New York City, some groups have a palpable effect on the way life is lived, when their numbers reach at least 5 to 15 percent and when the members are active in public life.

How likely is it that an urban gospel movement could grow so strong that it reaches a ?city-changing tipping point? at which time the gospel begins having a visible impact on the city-life and culture produced there? We know this can happen through God?s grace. The history books give us examples. However, only the very rare Christian leaders, like John Wesley, will live to see the movement they have begun grow to such a level of effectiveness. So urban ministers should make this their goal, and give their whole lives to it, but not expect to see it in their own lifetimes. That?s the right balance between expectation and patience that we need to strike, if we are going to see our cities loved and reached for Christ.

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1. Translation from Leslie C. Allen, Psalms 101-150, Word Commentary, Vol. 21, 210.

2. Frank Frick, The City in Ancient Israel, quoted in Harvie M. Conn and Manuel Ortiz, Urban Ministry:

The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 83.

3. Miroslav Volf, *Soft Difference?*

4. Thomas Schreiner makes a good case that in the New Testament people glorify God typically by believing in him (cf. Acts 13:48; Rom 4:20; 15:7,9; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 1:6,12,14; 2 Thess 3:1.) What is in view here is salvation of the pagan members of the city because they see the lives and service of Christians. See Thomas Schreiner, *1,2 Peter, Jude* (New American Commentary) Broadman, 2003, p.124. Peter's reference to pagans glorifying God "on the day of his visitation" means the many people who, by judgment day, will have come to faith through observing the lives of Christians.

5. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, & the World* (Bible Speaks Today series) (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 293.

6. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries*, (HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 161-162.

7. I recognize that other human factors were used by God to bring about the astonishing growth of the early church in its first three centuries. There was a cultural crisis in the Greco-Roman world-view. The worship of the old pagan gods was dying out. Nevertheless, historians recognize how crucial it was for the influence and spread of the church that it first took root in the urban areas.

8. Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (University of California, 1999.)

9. Stott, *The Message of Acts*, 292,

10. This is true whether one takes a stricter view of population within legal "city limits" (see www.worldatlas.com/city pops.htm) or larger "metropolitan areas" (see www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html).

11. Harvie Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church* (Baker, 1994), 181-182.

12. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 93. It should be noted that cities are attractive to the poor and minorities because a) they offer more job opportunities than rural areas and b) they provide "mini-cities" of people from the same ethnic group. City government, however, is often hostile to newcomers.

13. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 94.