

ADVANCING THE GOSPEL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

PRINCIPLES FROM THE BOOK OF ACTS

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This paper examines four traits of ministry for the 21st century drawn from the book of Acts: church multiplying, gospel centered, context sensitive, and city focused.

INTRODUCTION

The dawn of a new century has witnessed the emergence of a more globalized, urbanized, and post-secular world. This means, among other things, that we can expect to find multicultural, urban-centric similarities resembling the likes of the Roman Empire. First, the globalization of the world resembles the triumph of Rome's power that created the *Pax Romana*, an unprecedented mobility of people, capital, and ideas. Cities became multiethnic and international in unprecedented ways. Likewise, today cities link more to the rest of the world than they do to their own geographically connected countries, and in fact, residents of global cities are more like one another than they are like fellow citizens of their own country.¹

Second, we see the trend toward urbanization. In the Greco-Roman world at the height of the Roman Empire, individual nation-states were weak, and large cities such as Rome, Corinth, and Ephesus operated as independent city-states. Cities, not national governments, ruled the world. Today, technology and mobility are again weakening the control nation states have on their own territories. It is becoming impossible to control the flow of information and capital in and out of countries. Multinational corporations operate out of major cities but do not submit to or serve the interests of any country. Corporate and creative elites, whom Pico Iyer calls "Nowherians,"² live in several cities at once rather than in any particular country. All around us we witness the growth in both the power and size of major cities.

Third, we live in an increasingly fragmented and pluralistic world again. For centuries cultures and nations had much more widespread consensus about basic questions of truth, morality, the nature of God, and ultimate reality. Now, as in the Roman world, we recognize the presence of multiple religious faith communities in every society. We have traditional, secular, and pagan communities living side by side, a result of both globalization and disillusionment with the Enlightenment in the West. For nearly one hundred years, the elites of Europe and North America were uniformly skeptical about religion and spirituality. Now, however, the old idea that unaided human reason and science can solve the world's ills and answer life's big questions is seen as a dead end. We are entering a truly post-secular, pagan, pluralistic era, one very much like ancient Rome.

Of special interest is the fact that the number of orthodox Christians in United States philosophy departments has gone from zero to twenty-five percent in just thirty years. This means that for the first time in eighty years there is "intellectual

1. Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, 2d ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

2. Pico Iyer, *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls and the Search for Home* (New York: Vintage Books, 2000).

space” for Christians to engage in scholarship, the arts, and other cultural production. This is big news for center cities like New York and Los Angeles.

For centuries, no matter what the world was like, Christians have gone back to the book of Acts to learn ministry practice. But now, as we have seen, we have even more reason to do so. Our world has become much more like the world of the first century. If we want to know how to spread the gospel in the twenty-first century, the book of Acts has special relevance for our era. Specifically, the book of Acts outlines four ministry features which are pertinent to our own world and time. New Testament ministry strategy was church multiplying, gospel centered, context sensitive, and city focused.

PART I: CHURCH MULTIPLYING (ACTS 14)

THE NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLE

The concept of church multiplication was the underlying strategy for ministry in the first century, and it is equally crucial for effectiveness in the twenty-first century. Throughout the book of Acts we see that church planting was not a rare occurrence. Rather, church planting was woven into the foundational fabric of first-century church ministry. It happened constantly. Paul never evangelized or ministered without also planting churches.

For decades expositors have looked to Acts to find the basic elements of ministry. They have typically made lists such as this: Bible teaching, evangelism, fellowship, discipleship, worship. Yet right there along with everything else is church planting, although it has often been overlooked. This oversight has created an underlying, unconscious thought that church planting is no longer necessary. However, church planting should be part of this list of basic ministry elements and must be natural and constant, not rare or episodic.

From Acts 14:21-28 we see two phases to Paul’s ministry: Christian formation and church formation. In a concise example of how Paul produced Christian formation, Acts 14 highlights the principles of evangelism and instruction.

- + *Evangelism.* The word used for “preach” (“They preached the good news,” Acts 14:21) connotes a much more comprehensive word than simply speaking; the word *evangelizdomenoi* carries multilevel action. There’s a great deal more to evangelism than simply preaching sermons. The book of Acts shows Paul spreading the gospel through preaching in synagogue services, sharing in small group Bible studies, speaking out in marketplaces, leading discussions in rented halls, and talking to people one on one.
- + *Instruction.* We see that Paul went back to converts to “strengthen and encourage” (Acts 14:22). These two verbs used together in Acts chapters 9, 15, 18 are what John Stott calls an “almost technical term” for building up new believers.³ Paul preached the gospel, and then he re-taught them “the faith” (Acts 14:22, referring to a definitive body of beliefs and theology).

Second, there is church formation consisting of two parts, which include, according to David Hesselgrave the congregating of believers and the consecrating of leaders.⁴ All through Acts chapter 14 through 16 we see new believers assembling regularly and joining a community, not simply going about their lives as before. In addition, the leaders were consecrated. In each place of ministry, Paul chose elders, leaders out of the converts, who became the ones to teach and shepherd the people in the faith. Though we have to allow flexibility for different cultures, the unavoidable principle is that Paul did not keep new believers and nascent congregations under his direct authority or dependent upon him. Rather, he organized them into churches in their own right, each with its own leadership and structure. When he began meeting with them, they were “disciples” (Acts 14:22), but when he left them, they were “churches” (Acts 14:23).

3. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 234.

4. David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: North America and Beyond*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2000).

As clarified by Tim Chester in his essay “Church Planting: A Theological Perspective,” Acts reveals two basic launching models for church planting, either initiated by pioneer individuals or by church-planting churches.⁵ Paul and his companions demonstrated pioneer church planting. Though he was sent out by the Antioch church and was thus accountable for his doctrine and behavior (Acts 13:1), his work in every city was pioneering work. He did groundbreaking evangelism in each place, without the cooperation or work of other churches.

The other model, church-planting churches, is implicit in Acts. It’s a simple fact that the churches Paul planted—and, in fact, all Christian churches for the first two hundred years—were household churches. The example of Lydia in Acts 16 provides a typical scenario. Lydia’s conversion became a bridge to converting her household (Acts 16:15), which then made her home the first church in Philippi (Acts 16:40). The same thing happened in Acts 18 with the household of Crispus. The churches at Philippi, Corinth, and everywhere else could only grow by multiplying new assemblies or house churches. Though Paul writes to the “church of God in Corinth” (1 Cor. 1:2), it is obvious by the end of the book that he is addressing a number of household churches, including Chloe’s household (1 Cor. 1:11) and the “household of Stephanas” (1 Cor. 16:15). With the household church as the basic building block, church planting was built into the very nature of early church.

WHY NEW CHURCHES NOW?

A common objection to the premise of church planting today lies in thinking that this New Testament example does not apply for churches of North America and Europe where so many churches already exist. Some question the need to start new churches when so many existing churches need to be renewed and revitalized. Consider the following, however.

The Best Way to Reach Newcomers. New churches are by far the best way to reach new generations, new residents, and new people groups. Studies show that newer churches attract new groups six to ten times better than older churches do. When a church is new, younger and newer people can assimilate more readily into leadership positions. When a church is new and without underlying tradition, it can afford to experiment. When a church is new, its main goal each week is not to satisfy the desires of the long-time members but to reach new people. As a result, new churches are much better at reaching new people in a city.

Also, more than ever, cities are filled with new immigrants and new residents. Globalization has brought new, mobile populations streaming into cities; without the planting of new churches, these new city dwellers will be unreached and unreachable. Moreover, the pluralistic nature of today’s cities means that generations and groupings differ vastly from one another, making the traditional Anglican parish model obsolete for mission. And lastly, the death of Christendom means we now have something Acts did not have—a lot of dead churches. Which gives us one more reason than Paul had to plant new churches!

The Best Way to Renew Old Churches. New churches are perhaps the best way to renew older churches and enhance all ministries. By showcasing new ministry forms and ideas that would never have been adopted in older churches, new churches help the entire body of Christ. In addition, new churches provide new converts in the city that find their way to older churches. New churches can also serve to support new ministries that have citywide benefits.

Church planting helps an existing church the best when the new congregation is voluntarily birthed by a more established “mother” congregation. The daughter church affords the mother church contact with new groups of people and pioneers new programs that the mother church may have been too traditional to try. Though there is some pain in seeing good friends and some leaders go away to form a new church, the mother church usually experiences an influx of enthusiastic leaders and members. Together the two churches usually see a major increase in numbers, joy, and confidence.

5. See Tim Chester, “Church Planting: A Theological Perspective,” in *Multiplying Churches*, ed. Stephen Timmis (Christian Focus, 2000),

It is also important to note that church planting is the only church ministry that becomes self-supporting, expanding the base for all other ministries. A city needs many ministries—youth work, schools, missions, and so on. Once they are begun, these ministries require outside funding for an indefinite period of time. A new church, however, only requires funding at its inception. Within a few years it becomes the source of Christian giving to other ministries, not the object of it. Because it brings in large numbers of unchurched people, church planting is by far the fastest way to grow the number of new givers to the kingdom work in a city.

NATURAL CHURCH PLANTING

What is meant by “natural” church planting? In contrast to natural, ongoing church multiplication is the unnatural or reluctant church planting that occurs when some church members split off to form a new church due to disagreement about doctrine, vision, or ministry philosophy. Another scenario is a reluctant or one-time church plant when circumstances, such as overcrowding of building space or development in a new part of the city, force church leaders to plant a new church. Although leaders may give begrudging permission or lend money to the project, it is still unnatural church planting in that it will not happen again unless circumstances dictate it.

Natural church planting, however, has at its core the mission and mindset of Paul, in which church planting is considered one of the many ministries of the church, along with teaching, evangelism, discipling, worship, Christian education, and youth work. Rather than being seen as one big traumatic hiccup followed by a long sigh of relief, church planting is seen as an ongoing, natural rhythm of church life. Like Paul, who always did evangelism, discipleship, and church planting, churches must possess these three key ministry paradigms.

1. A Willingness to Give Away Assets. As contrary as it seems to our idea of growth, in order for natural church planting to thrive, a church must be willing to give away control of money, members, and leaders. Paul’s example demonstrates a willingness to empower new leaders; he gave them ownership and thus lost a lot of control. This is a huge barrier for churches, in that it is hard for church leaders to intentionally forfeit large donors, key leaders, or close friends. It is also hard for ministers to give away the glory of growing programs and swelling numbers. When a leader’s ministry adds people, who are then assimilated into the church, the leader receives a measure of success and the status of large numbers and influential programs. If, however, the leader organizes the added people into new churches, he is losing money, members, numbers, leaders, and control. But that is just what Paul did.

2. An Ability to Share Control of the Ministry. This is scary, especially to people who care about biblical truth. But it’s a simple fact that the new daughter church will not look just like the mother church (or her leader). It will develop its own voice and emphases. On the one hand, pains must be taken to ensure that the differences are not too great, or else fellowship and cooperation may become strained. On the other hand, if one insists that the daughter church be a clone of the original church, then one cannot succeed in church multiplication.

3. A Desire to Advance the Kingdom. Third, natural church planting necessitates caring more for the kingdom of God than for one’s own tribe. Once again we look to Paul for the example, and we see the way he spoke of Apollos, who, though not a disciple of his (Acts 18:24), was esteemed by Paul and spoken of in the warmest of terms (1 Cor. 3:6, 4:9, 16:12). We see it in the way Paul constantly took his hands off new churches (Acts 16:40) and demonstrated a concern not for his own power but for the kingdom as a whole. Our attitude to new church development can be a test of whether our mindset is geared to our own institutional turf or to the overall health and prosperity of the kingdom of God in the city. Will we resent the ten people we have lost to a new church-planting endeavor or rejoice in the eighty people the kingdom has gained?

The church-planting mindset is not so much a matter of trusting new leaders as much as it is trusting God. Paul does not give the new churches up to themselves or others. Rather, he committed them to God (Acts 20:32). Since we live in the Acts world again, it is doubly important to make church multiplication a central ministry strategy.

PART II: GOSPEL CENTERED (ACTS 15)

Acts 14 provides the example of church multiplication, and Acts 15 demonstrates the second strategic ministry principle for advancing the gospel in the twenty-first century, that of having a gospel-centered focus. By gospel-centered, I do not simply mean that ministry is to be doctrinally orthodox. Of course, it must certainly be that. I am speaking more specifically of the gospel message of acceptance by grace alone. While every other religion operates on some type of performance-related principle (“I obey, therefore I am accepted”), the gospel condemns any self-righteousness and assures us of Christ’s righteousness (“I am accepted through Christ, therefore I obey”).

Martin Luther’s fundamental insight was that the principle of “religion” is the default mode of the human heart. The heart continues to work in that way even after conversion to Christ. Though we recognize and embrace the principle of the gospel, our hearts are constantly trying to return to the mode of self-salvation. By seeking other ways to save ourselves, we fall prey to pride, spiritual deadness, and strife. Because of the subtle and sinister propensities of our hearts, the gospel must be communicated clearly and constantly, not a click toward legalism and not a click toward license. Legalism (or moralism) is truth without grace, which is not real truth. Relativism is grace without truth, which is not real grace. To the degree a ministry fails to reflect the One who is full of both grace *and* truth (John 1:14), it loses its life-changing power.

In Acts 15:1-25 we see Paul, in the middle of a church-planting career, headed to Jerusalem for a big theological debate. Now, why do that? At cursory glance, it would seem that Paul’s mission work was surely of more consequence than a theological roundtable. But Paul made no bifurcation here, and right in the middle of his ministry, he attended a theological summit in order to clarify the gospel message.

The root cause of the theological divide was the issue of Gentile converts and their adherence to Jewish religious customs. It was nothing less than a crisis of early Christian identity. The earliest Gentile converts to Christianity had already become Jewish culturally; many of them were “God-fearers” who had been circumcised or who abided by the Mosaic clean laws. Paul, however, began bringing in pagan converts who had not become culturally Jewish, and furthermore, he was not demanding converted Gentile pagans to adopt Jewish cultural patterns. It was not long before a group began saying that “the Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses” (Acts 15:5). This disgruntled group had taken their Jewish cultural norms and promoted them to matters of spiritual merit. When they did that, they lost their grasp on the gospel of grace and slid into legalism. The Council at Jerusalem was influenced by Peter, who reminded them of his own experience with Gentile converts and how he witnessed God “giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us” (Acts 15:8), and by James, who rightly asserted that Gentile Christians, though free from any requirements as to salvation, were not free to live as they liked as members of a Christian community. They were obliged to live in love and to respect the scruples of their Jewish brethren who were culturally different than they were. So they were ordered to live in such a way so as not to offend or distress their culturally different Christian brothers. (They were not to eat raw meat, they were to abide by Levitical marriage laws, and so on.) While we twenty-first century Christians tend to overlook the importance of this first-century theological discussion, we could hardly ask for a better example of the practical application of Martin Luther’s axiom, “We are saved by faith alone, but not by faith that is alone.”

As Acts 15 illustrates, without gospel centeredness, we can fall into legalism. On the other side of the spectrum, we can fall into relativism. When God is whomever or whatever we make him to be, then right and wrong become equally relative, and the church is drained of spiritual life and impact. If God is preached as a demanding, angry God, or if he is preached as an all-loving God who never demands anything, then listeners’ lives will not be transformed. They may be frightened or inspired or soothed, but they will not be changed at the root, because they are not hearing the gospel. The gospel shows us that God is far more holy and absolute than the moralists’ god, because he could not be satisfied by our moral efforts, even the best moral efforts. On the other hand, the gospel shows us that God is far more loving and gracious than the relativists’ god, who loves everyone no matter

what they do. The true God of the gospel had to suffer and die to save us, while the god of the relativist pays no price to love us.

The gospel produces a unique blend of genuine humility and joyful confidence in the convert. The gospel says, “I am so lost that Jesus had to die to save me. But I am so loved that Jesus was glad to die to save me.” This beautiful blend of grace and truth transforms the very basis of our identity. I can’t tell you how important this gospel-centered balance is to the foundation of all mission and ministry. Unless you distinguish the gospel from both religion and irreligion—from both traditional moralism and liberal relativism—then newcomers in our church services will assume they are being called to be good and nice people. But when, as here in Acts 15, the gospel is communicated in its unique, counterintuitive balance of truth and love, then listeners will be surprised. Modern people try to place the church somewhere along a spectrum from “liberal” to “conservative,” from relativistic to moralistic. But when they see a church filled with people who insist on the truth but without a shred of superiority or self-righteousness, this explodes their categories, since to them, people who have the truth are not gracious and people who are gracious don’t demand the truth. In contrast, Christians boldly yet humbly tell the truth that we are sinners in need of grace.

Paul knew that gospel centeredness—not falling into either legalism or license —was absolutely critical to the mission of the church. The secret of his ministry power was getting the gospel message across in its purest form, without acquiescing to cultural preferences or traditions. To be even slightly off to one side or the other is to lose spiritual efficacy and miss true conversion. Legalistic churches reform people’s behavior through social coercion, but the people remain spiritually immature, insecure, and hypercritical. Relativistic churches give members a measure of self-esteem and the veneer of peace, but in the end that is superficial, too. The result, Archibald Alexander said, is like trying to seal a letter with a signet ring without applying the transforming agent, the heat. Without the warming agent, the ring will either damage the surface of the wax or break it into pieces. The element of heat is necessary to permanently change the wax into the likeness of the ring.⁶ So, too, without the Holy Spirit working through the gospel to radically humble and change us from the inside out, religion of either the hard or soft variety will not avail.

PART III: CONTEXT SENSITIVE (ACTS 13-14)

Contextualization can, unfortunately, be used to mean that one’s interpretation of Scripture is as valid as any other person’s interpretation. Or it could mean that every interpretive community has a perspective that helps us see aspects of God’s self-disclosure that other communities cannot in themselves see or hear. That’s better. But as a practitioner of ministry, I define contextualization as “adapting my communication of the gospel without changing its essential character.”

CONTEXTUALIZATION IS UNAVOIDABLE

I would go so far as to say that there is no “non-contextualized” Christianity. Jesus did not come to earth as a generalized human being. In becoming human, he had to become a particular human, and he chose to become male, Jewish, and working-class. Becoming human necessitated becoming a socially and culturally situated person.

As soon as we begin to minister, we begin the process of appropriating God’s revelation in biblical form to our current cultural form. For example, the Bible clearly directs us to use music to praise God, but as soon as we choose a type of music, we enter a culture. As soon as we choose a language or vocabulary or level of emotional expressiveness and intensity or sermon illustration, we are moving toward the social context of some people and away from the social context of others. At Pentecost everyone heard the sermon in his or her own language and dialect. But since Pentecost, we can never be all things to all people at the very same time, and thus, adaptation to culture is inevitable.

6. Archibald Alexander, “Thoughts on Religious Experience” (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1844), 5, 9.

This is not relativism! “No truth which human beings may articulate can ever be articulated in a culture-transcending way, but that does not mean that the truth thus articulated does not transcend culture.”⁷ Paul did not change the gospel, but he did adapt it. While this may open the door to abuses, the refusal to contextualize opens the door to just as many abuses of the gospel, only unconsciously.

Missionary strategy, then, consists of two parts: retaining the essentials of the gospel message and removing any nonessential language. On the one hand, as a minister of the gospel, be careful not to remove any of the offensive essentials of the gospel message, such as the teaching on sin, the need for repentance, the lostness of those outside of Christ, and so on. On the other hand, be careful to remove any nonessential language or practice that confuses or offends the sensibilities of the people you are trying to reach. The key to effective mission is to *know the difference between essential and nonessential*.

A deep understanding of the gospel is the guide to contextualization. Remember that religion leads to either pride (if we are living up to our standards) or inferiority (if we are failing to live up to our standards), but the gospel makes us both humble and confident at once. If we need the approval of the receiving culture too much, it shows a lack of gospel confidence. If we need the trappings of our own culture too much, it shows a lack of gospel humility. Gospel humility directs us to neither hate tradition nor be bound to it.

CONTEXTUALIZATION IS EXEMPLIFIED BY PAUL

Examples of how Paul adapted the gospel message to different cultures abound in Acts.⁸ Acts 13 shows Paul sharing the gospel in a synagogue to those who believed in the God of the Bible, while Acts 14 reveals him sharing the gospel to a pagan, blue-collar crowd. The differences and similarities are striking.

- + *Different Reference Point*. His citation of authority was very different in these two cases. To the Jews at the synagogue he quoted Scripture and John the Baptist, and to the pagans he argued from general revelation in the creation of the world.
- + *Different Apologetic*. To the Jews Paul showed that only Christ could justify “from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:39). In essence, he said, “You think you are righteous enough, but you are not. Only Christ can make you righteous.” To the non-Jewish pagans, however, he entreated them to “turn from worthless things to the living God” who is the real source of joy (Acts 14: 15-17). Here he was saying, “You think you are free, but you are not. You are enslaved to more subtle, insidious idols.”
- + *Similarities*. Despite these very profound differences, both audiences were told about a God who is powerful yet good (Acts 13:16-22; 14:17). Both incidents revealed listeners who were trying to save themselves in a wrong way, either moralists trying to obey the law (Acts 13:39) or pagans trying to serve other gods (Acts 14:15). In both places Paul told his listeners to turn away from some scheme of performance and accept what God had done through the work of Jesus Christ.

CONTEXTUALIZATION INVOLVES DIFFERENT MINISTRY APPROACHES

The differences between the three converts of Acts 16 are amazing. First of all, there was the difference in ethnic background: Lydia was Asian, the slave girl was most likely Greek, and the jailer was Roman. Secondly, we see disparate socioeconomic backgrounds: Lydia was an affluent businesswoman, the slave girl was poor, and the Roman jailer was middle class. Finally, we see radically different spiritual backgrounds. Lydia was a God-fearing, religious person who believed in the God of the Bible in a general way and who showed spiritual interest immediately. The slave girl was demon-possessed and literally ran after Paul in spiritual turmoil. She was the only one of the three we would call a real “seeker.” The Roman jailer was neither spiritually experienced nor spiritually empty, and in fact, portrayed no spiritual interest at all.

7. Donald A. Carson, “Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths in a Postmodern World,” in *Science & Christian Belief*, vol. 14, no. 2 (October 2002), 107-22.

8. See Jay Edward Adams, *Audience Adaptations in the Sermons and Speeches of Paul* (Baker Book House, 1976).

Paul, in response to the three very disparate social and spiritual backgrounds of his would-be converts, demonstrated three separate ministry approaches.

- + *Lydia: Ministry Through Word.* Though we are not told here, Paul almost surely would have approached God-fearers and Jews through teaching and expounding the Bible in a new way for them—through Christocentric exegesis. He would have shown, as Jesus did with his disciples in Luke 24, that the entire Old Testament was all about Christ. This released Lydia from mere religion into gospel Christianity.
- + *Slave Girl: Ministry Through Deeds.* Psychologically, the slave girl was oppressed by demonic false masters, and economically she was oppressed and exploited by human false masters. When Paul freed her from one of the false masters, she was also freed from the other. What Paul did here was not just word ministry but also ministry of deed. She was freed not only from demons but also from economic exploitation.
- + *Jailer: Ministry Through Community Example.* Just as Lydia, an educated woman, needed a persuasive argument and the troubled slave girl needed the act of liberation, the jailer needed the practical example of godly character. He was shocked by the Christ-like character of Paul and Silas in jail. Through their example of praising God in the face of suffering, showing kindness in response to the jailer's cruelty, and acting with integrity when given the opportunity to escape, the jailer witnessed the ministry of example.

We learn that every church needs to engage its community in the same three basic strategies—ministry in word, deed, and example.

MINISTRY OF WORD: THE GOSPEL FOR RELIGIOUS PEOPLE (ACTS 16:13-15)

Religion tends to be “outside in,” meaning if one works hard according to biblical principles, then God will accept him or her. But the gospel is “inside out,” in that God has already accepted me, and thus I work hard to live according to biblical principles. Religion (explicitly in other faiths and implicitly in legalistic Christianity) makes moral observance a means of salvation. Even people who believe in the Christian God can at a functional level base their sanctification on their justification.⁹ Thus, as ministers, we need to distinguish between general religion and gospel Christianity. The main way to reach religious people is through preaching that focuses on the self-justifying roots of sinful behavior and leads to worship of God rather than mere information transfer.

Content: Connecting to the Big Story. What does it mean to proclaim the gospel, and how can we do so in a way that both converts the religious and engages the secular? The answer is Christ-centered interpretation and preaching. We must preach every text in such a way that it reveals Jesus and his saving work. According to Edmund Clowney, if we tell a particular Bible story without putting it into the overall main Bible story about Christ, we actually change the meaning of the particular event. It becomes a moralistic exhortation rather than a call to live by faith in the work of Christ. There are, in the end, only two ways to read the Bible: it is either about us or about Jesus.

Method: Linking to the Listeners. Our preaching must connect the gospel with the stories of our listeners. How do gospel themes address our culture's hopes, fears, and tensions? Begin with the familiar and show how the gospel confirms what is strong and good in the culture. Know the stories of your listeners extremely well. Show your sympathy with it. But use the gospel to challenge and destabilize common cultural assumptions at points where they are weak or inadequate. Finally, comfort and galvanize with the promises of the gospel.

Speak to your whole community, not just the ones in the seats. If your church is to be a church for the whole neighborhood, you must preach and minister as if non-Christians are also present. You must conduct church as if the whole community was listening in. If you preach as if non-Christians from the community are there, it won't be long before they are there. What you want is for Christian listeners to say, “I wish my non-Christian friend could see or hear this!” If this is not the case, then it is likely that the church will be filled with Christians who commute

9. Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarist Press, 1979), 101.

from various communities far and wide rather than filling up with Christians and seekers from your church's immediate neighborhoods.

MINISTRY OF DEED: THE GOSPEL FOR POSTMODERN PEOPLE (ACTS 16:16-19)

As was discussed above, the pagan slave girl was poor, unable to be liberated simply through preaching. She needed a direct encounter with the powers that bound her spiritually, socially, and economically. In his earthly ministry Jesus exhibited constant concern for the poor and considered it to be a mark of his presence (Matt. 11:5). Increasingly, in a globalized world, we will win neither the elites nor the masses unless we embody the gospel to people with economic and material needs, not just spiritual needs.

The renewal of Christ's salvation ultimately includes a renewed universe. In the meantime, there is no part of our existence that is untouched by His blessing. Christ's miracles were miracles of the kingdom, performed as signs of what the kingdom means....

His blessing was pronounced upon the poor, the afflicted, the burdened and heavy-laden who came to Him and believed in Him....

The miraculous signs that attested Jesus' deity and authenticated the witness of those who transmitted the gospel to the church are not continued, for their purpose is fulfilled. But the pattern of the kingdom that was revealed through those signs must continue in the church.... Kingdom evangelism is therefore holistic as it transmits by word and deed the promise of Christ for body and soul as well as the demand of Christ for body and soul.¹⁰

Content: Postmodern Ministry Issues. Following are some general guidelines for ministry to postmoderns, keeping in mind that these are general and do not substitute for the specific cultural nuances of a particular community or neighborhood.

- + Apologetics are constantly necessary but should be mainly presuppositional.
- + Small groups should be stressed over all other programs.
- + Organic lay leadership should be emphasized.
- + Show how the gospel helps us embrace the excluded, be a servant of common good, live with integrity regarding sex, money, and power. Evangelism has more to do with excellence and thoughtfulness in the way we do our work.
- + Music and worship cannot be confined to the classical or the contemporary. High quality aesthetics are critical in our technological age.
- + The preferable ministry area is the parish or neighborhood.
- + While racial integration has always been biblical, it is even more important to emphasize multicultural integration and racial reconciliation as society becomes more multiethnic.
- + Communication style must have the irony of gospel humility, rather than the pomposity of slickly packaged and controlled messaging of modern Christianity.
- + Preach the freedom of the gospel. Because postmodern people have little sense of moral absolutes and desire to be free to their own selves and dreams, they respond to the preaching of gospel freedom (versus gospel forgiveness approach for traditional-minded people).

Method: Community-Specific Service. In order to serve those in our communities, Christians and non-Christians alike, we must think of community service content that fits the particular culture of the neighborhood. Research and recognize the particular needs of individuals in your community. This varies greatly depending upon

¹⁰ Edmund P. Clowney, "Kingdom Evangelism," in *The Pastor-Evangelist: Preacher, Model, and Mobilizer for Church Growth*, ed. Roger S. Greenway (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987), 22.

your neighborhood, its demographic and socioeconomic makeup. For example, what are the social or educational needs in your neighborhood? What are the flaws or difficulties with your community systems and services? The key is to find ways to stand with the broader community to face effects of our fallen condition and be, as a church, a sign of the kingdom of God. Find ways to bring emotional, social, and spiritual healing in a way that the world can see. Link your church to the needs of the community by weaving verbal witness and Christian community together. Do not simply create social programs, but rather link outreach service ministry with small group fellowship and verbal expressions of the gospel.

MINISTRY THROUGH COMMUNITY EXAMPLE: THE GOSPEL FOR SECULAR PEOPLE (ACTS 16:20-40)

What we see in the example of Paul and Silas is the power of worship and the impact of community upon an unbelieving, secular audience. Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14:23-25 demonstrate that nonbelievers were attracted and disturbed by worship. We can surmise, then, that nonbelievers are expected to be in our worship services and are to find worship challenging and comprehensible, not comfortable. If our services primarily stress evangelism, they will bore Christians. If they aim primarily at Christian education, they will bore and confuse unbelievers. If, however, our services emphasize praising the God who saves us, they will both instruct Christians and challenge non-Christians. Evangelistic worship is especially important for postmodern people for whom context is everything and who need to see how the gospel works in people's lives. Worship as if non-Christians are present and stress inclusive music and simple—not tribal, sentimental, archaic or colloquial—language.

Socially Engaged Community. We must be careful to avoid forming a Christian *subculture*, in which we dress and talk differently while holding to the same underlying values as the surrounding culture. For example, believers may not smoke or get drunk or have extramarital sex, yet in their core beings they may be as materialistic and individualistic and image-conscious as those around them. We must also avoid forming an *anti-culture*, in which Christians feel polluted by the presence of secular schools, entertainment, arts, and culture. In this model Christians feel as though they cannot really function in society without getting the cultural power back through legislation. Rather we should form a *counterculture*, in which we are externally quite like the surrounding culture with a positive and conversant posture toward it, yet quite different in the ways we understand money, relationships, human life, sex, and so on. We demonstrate the countercultural traits of chastity, simplicity, humility, and self-sacrifice.

Socially Unified Community. Think of the membership in Lydia's house church. The three new converts—Asian businesswoman, poor slave girl, and Roman jailer—were radically diverse in ethnic and socioeconomic background. The gospel community embraces different ethnicities, economic classes, and even cognitive styles. The gospel leads them to embrace one another.

One of the main problems that postmodern people have with both modern and traditional worldviews is the way in which they exclude. The truth is seen as being divisive. But, as Lesslie Newbigin shows, relativism is as exclusive in its claims and can be a warrant for worse oppression.¹¹ Christians must communicate and demonstrate that the gospel is different. We must show our uniqueness by following our Lord who always embraced the moral and spiritual outsider (Matt. 21:31). If you understand the gospel of grace, you treat the outsider with respect (because the unbelieving outsider may be a better person) and with hope (because our salvation is a miracle, and therefore no one is beyond hope). No other worldview can produce this combination of humility and confidence.

Culturally Appropriate Community. What will a gospel-renewed community look like? Honor the culture yet renew it with the gospel. Consider how your community will be shaped with regard to leadership structures, spiritual growth groups, and worship styles. Think of community connections that fit the culture. How will you connect with and welcome people from the broader community into your Christian community? How will you meet and get to know the people of your neighborhood? Remember that where the pastor and the core leaders

11. See Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans, 1989).

live is important. The only organic, natural way to connect to the broader community is to live right in the area of ministry and face the same community issues with everyone else. What sorts of questions are being asked by your community? How does the gospel set out to “answer” those questions?

PART IV: CITY FOCUSED (ACTS 16-19)

With care not to ignore the rest of the world and smaller cities, we will find it helpful to use Paul's first-century, city-focused model in the twenty-first century. As noted earlier, there is a mobility of ideas, people, and capital unprecedented since the *Pax Romana*, and this leads not only to globalization and pluralization but also to renewed urbanization. Travel during the *Pax Romana* was easier than it ever had been and ever was again until the nineteenth century.¹² And when that happened, cities rose again.

The rise of early Christianity was largely an urban phenomenon.¹³ Globalized cities quickly became multiethnic, and as a result, increasingly more influential than their own countries. First-century Antioch serves as an example; it was a virtual United Nations, with Asian, African, Jewish, Greek, and Roman sections. From Antioch there were powerful networks that led back into three continents. Capital and culture flowed back and forth through those networks. And thus Paul's mission strategy was remarkably urban-centered.

Paul's missionary journeys essentially ignored the countryside. When he entered a new region, he planted churches and then left. The result was that by year 300 AD, half of the urban populations of the Roman empire were Christian, while most of the countryside was still pagan.¹⁴ Because Christianity captured the cities, it eventually captured the society. What captivates the cities also captivates the art, media, scholarship, and the professions. Cities are the culture-forming wombs of the society, made by God to be so.

URBANIZATION

In 1950, the metropolitan area of New York City was the only world city with a population of more than ten million people. Today, however, there are more than twenty such cities, twelve of which have emerged in the last two decades, with many more to come. All of these new, global mega-cities are developing in what used to be called the Third World.

In the eighteenth century a combination of population growth and technological advances brought rural Europe to its “carrying capacity,” creating a surplus population. In every family there were those who needed to leave the countryside and small towns to make a living elsewhere. As a result of this century-long urbanization, the great cities of Europe swelled to become the largest in the world. Many experts believe this is beginning to happen in Africa, Asia, and to a lesser extent in Latin America, where the cities are literally exploding with new immigrants from the villages and rural areas. If urban to rural population ratio in the southern hemisphere stabilizes at seventy-five to twenty-five percent, as it did in Europe and North America in the past century, then we can expect to see half a billion people move into the cities of Africa and Asia alone, the equivalent of one new Bangkok (eight million people) every two months.¹⁵

This urban explosion has served as the main vehicle for the most important new development in Christianity in centuries. While Christianity has declined in Europe and barely held its own in North America, it has been growing exponentially in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, such that now the majority of Christians live south of the equator. Christianity is growing more rapidly than any other faith, but the vast majority of believers will be neither white nor European nor Euro-American.¹⁶

¹² See Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

¹³ See 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* (HarperCollins, 1997).

¹⁴ Some think the word “pagan” comes from the Greek *paganus*, meaning a farmer or man of the country.

¹⁵ The information in these two paragraphs is from “The Brown Revolution,” *The Economist*, May 9, 2002.

¹⁶ Phillip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford, 2002), p.2.

The millions of newcomers to burgeoning cities have characteristics that make them far more open to Christianity than they were before arriving. First, they are more open to new ideas, having been uprooted from traditional settings. Second, they have great need for help and support in order 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 the cities have “next to nothing in working government services.”¹⁷ Churches offer supportive community, a new spiritual family, and a liberating gospel message.

GLOBALIZATION

The technological revolution has led to an unprecedented mobility of people, ideas, and capital, often called globalization. First, this means that major world cities are far more connected to other major cities around the world than they are to their own nations. These connections between major cities, however, are not limited to business elites. Large immigrant populations in global cities tie each urban area more tightly to scores of other countries around the world than to its own regional locale. For example, thousands of New York City residents are far more connected to the Philippines, Haiti, Columbia, China, and Nigeria than they are to New Jersey, Connecticut, or upstate New York.

Second, these networked mega-cities are more economically and culturally powerful than the national governments of their individual geographical regions. These global cities are the seats of multinational corporations and international networks, and the mobility of capital between them means that national governments are powerless to control the flow of money in and out of their own economies. In addition, the technological revolution means that national governments are now powerless to control what their people watch or learn (as evidenced by the collapse of communist Russia). As a result, it is the cultural values of global cities that are now being transmitted around the world to every people group, such that major cities like New York and Los Angeles are far more influential in forming the culture of residents in, say, rural Indiana or rural Mexico than are the national or local governments.

The apostle Paul consistently targeted the largest city of a region and did extensive urban church planting. He knew that once he reached the city, he had reached the society and culture. According to Meeks, the brilliance of targeting cities was that city dwellers, by virtue of constant change, were more open to new ideas than were conservative rural people. In addition, city dwellers were more connected and mobile, such that when they were converted to Christianity, the gospel spread farther. Rodney Stark attributes the rise of Christianity to the fact that cities, with their greater social problems, served as visible platforms of Christian service.

*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 orphans and widows, 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 Christian 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 [Christianity] brought was not simply an urban movement, but a new culture.*¹⁸

BIBLICAL MANDATE OF CITIES

Paul’s focus on cities should not surprise us. The rest of the Bible shows us the importance of cities. God told Adam and Eve to “have dominion,” to develop the earth, to bring forth the riches God put in nature (and human nature) at creation. This constituted a call to engage in enterprise, science, and the arts. God intended for Adam and Eve to build a city. But Adam and Eve failed their commission to cultivate creation under his lordship. Instead,

17. Ibid., p. 93.

18. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 161-162.

Jesus Christ had to come as the “new Adam” and became the head of a new humanity. When we look ahead to the ultimate fruit of the “new Adam” in Revelation 21 and 22, we see a glimpse of the climax of history—the earth has become a city. In the middle of the city to come is the tree of life; paradise is restored. God’s future world is urban. God began history in a garden, but he will end it in a city!

When Israel made Jerusalem its capital, God directed that the temple be built on Zion, an elevation within the city, so that it rose above the city as its skyscraper. But unlike the skyscrapers of the “city of man,” designed for their builders’ own prosperity, God’s city was different. “In the city of our God, his holy mountain is beautiful in elevation, the joy of the whole earth” (Psalm 48:1-2). No doubt Jesus had this in mind when said to his disciples, “You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5:14). In this way, Jesus called his disciples to form an alternate society within the city: a mini-city where sex, money, and power were used in life-giving ways.¹⁹

CULTURAL IMPORTANCE OF CITIES

Even today, in our broken world, cities continue to be the main way that culture develops. As the city goes, so go the arts, scholarship, communication, philosophy, commerce, etc. From the beginning, cities have been centers of cultural power. In cities the number and diversity of human connections outstrip the possibilities for such anywhere else.

Connections With Those Unlike Us. The city puts us together with many people unlike us. The city attracts minorities who can band together for mutual support. The city is merciful to those with less power and creates safe enclaves for those unlike one another: singles and families, the poor and the rich, immigrants and lifelong residents, racial minorities and ethnic majorities. When we are brought into contact with large numbers of diverse people, our thinking and views are radically challenged. We are confronted with creative new ways to think about things. We become vastly more creative, committed, skillful in all we do.

Connections With Those Like Us. The city puts us together with people who are like us. The city attracts the strongest as well as the weakest. The city attracts the most talented and ambitious, and thus, we are confronted by many people who are far better than us at our talents and giftedness. Cities draw and gather together human resources and tap their potential for cultural development as no other human organizations can.

CONCLUSION

What then are the implications for twenty-first century ministry?

Worldwide Mission. Like first-century missions, we should attempt to reach the city in order to reach the world. This, of course, is not an argument for neglecting any particular people group or part of the world. The church needs to minister the gospel wherever there are people. But many of the current “unreached people groups” in remote areas of the world may be gone within twenty years, having moved into global cities. The problem is that white, evangelical Protestants who control the North American mission apparatus are themselves overwhelmingly non-urban in background and neither understand nor appreciate urban life.

It may be helpful to those who harbor misgiving about cities... to reflect on the fact that urbanization as a present fact of life for most of the human family is a reality under the providential control of God. In Acts 17:26-27 the apostle Paul observes: “he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.” Viewed in light of these verses, city growth is not something to be perceived as entirely the work of the

19. Some may ask, “But can’t Christians be an alternate city in the suburbs?” Of course. I have discovered during my years in New York, however, that it is considerably easier to show the world God’s urban alternative within an actual human city. In racially homogeneous towns it is pragmatically harder to show how the gospel uniquely undermines racial barriers. In places where fewer artists live it is pragmatically harder to show the gospel’s effect on art. In economically homogeneous places, it is pragmatically harder for Christians to realize how much money they are spending on themselves.

devil, but as part of God's providential plan in history. God's redemptive purpose behind urban growth is that "men should seek him and reach out for him." By means of these enormous gatherings of people, God provides the church with one of history's greatest opportunities for evangelization. Pressed together in metropolises, the race, the tribes, and diverse people groups are geographically more accessible than ever before. ... A sign of our time is the city. Through worldwide migration to the city God may be setting the stage for Christian mission's greatest and perhaps final hour.²⁰

Home Missions. The old distinction between home missions and foreign missions is made obsolete by global cities, with the city being the key to both. One urban church in Queens has planted three daughter churches: one in neighboring College Point, one in the neighboring Bronx, and one in the Philippines. The church had reached so many Filipino immigrants in its neighborhood that the new Christians wanted to plant a daughter church among their friends and relatives in their country of origin. Each major city is now a portal to most of the nations of the world. Not only are cities the key to what used to be called foreign missions, they are also the key to home missions.

Holistic Mission. As we have seen, there is no part of the city that can be neglected. First, the poor cannot be neglected, because God has always worked mightily among the urban poor. Word and deed ministries will have to be combined, both to Christians within the community and to those outside it. The churches' attitude toward and work with the poor will be a significant sign of its validity to others. Second, immigrants cannot be neglected, because they are far more conscious of their need for gospel ministry than they were in their homeland. Third, the elites cannot be neglected, because they are disproportionately powerful and must be called to use their educational, economic, and cultural power for the service of others. The church in the city must show its concern for the peace of the whole city (Jer. 29:7).

Personal Mission. Reaching the whole city is a way to reach our own hearts with the gospel. In the city we will find many things that will challenge our grasp of the gospel. We will find many people who seem spiritually and morally hopeless; but if the gospel of grace is true, why would we think their conversion to be any more of a miracle than our own? We will also find secular and unbelieving people who are wiser, kinder, and deeper than ourselves; but if the gospel of grace is true, why would we think that Christians are basically better kinds of people than non-Christians?

As a church in the city, we discovered that it was not enough for Christians to feel pity or even affection for the city. Staff and leaders had to humbly learn from and respect the city and its people. Our relationship with the people of New York City had to be a consciously reciprocal one. We had to see God's common grace in them. We had to be energized and enriched by the city, not drained by it. Ministry in the city, then, will help us grasp the gospel of grace in powerful ways. We may even come to see that, spiritually speaking, we need the city more than the city needs us.

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20. Roger Greenway, "World Urbanization and Missiological Education" in *Missiological Education for the Twenty-First Century*, ed. J. Dudley Woodberry, Charles Van Engen, and Edgar J. Elliston (Orbis, 1996).