

IDENTIFYING THE IDOLS OF THE CITY

AN ADDRESS TO URBAN CHURCH PLANTERS IN EUROPE

LEONARDO DE CHIRICO

In Acts 17, Paul shows that unmasking idols involves reading the “theological skyline” of the city. By understanding the systems of thought that capture the city’s life, we can offer it the freedom found in the gospel.

The year 2010 marked the 1,600th anniversary of Rome’s sack by Alaric and his Visigoth army (AD 410), an event that shocked the world and stirred Augustine to write the *City of God*. Rome had stood unbreached for 800 years but had fallen after the official adoption of Christianity. Protection by the old gods had been cast aside, and the sack was seen by some as the result. The tragic event was viewed as the consequence of a religious commitment away from paganism and toward the Christian God. It was a powerful apologetic argument for a return to classical paganism.

The *City of God* is Augustine’s massive counter-apologetic. Refugees escaping from Rome were looking for protection and wealth, which Rome was no longer able to offer them. Where should they go? Which city could embrace them with peace and prosperity? Augustine is sympathetic to their quest, but he claims that the real city is not Rome but the city of God. Rather than be trapped in the city of man, they should instead look forward to the city of God.

Augustine argues that gods and idols never secured the welfare of Rome. Massive conversions to the Christian God are not the cause of the sack. Actually, the sack demonstrates that the human powers of the city of man are frail and weak, in spite of their appearance and claim to the contrary. God is building his city, which is a growing historical reality as well as an eschatological kingdom.

Though written in the 5th century, Augustine’s great work is still meaningful for us today for numerous reasons. It’s an apologetic work coming from the city and aimed at the city. It connects spiritual realities to the historical events and cultural trends of the city. It compares and contrasts pagan idols with the Christian God, interpreting this contrast as a spiritual conflict. It listens to the city’s cries and responds with a robust biblical theology. It views the city of man with spiritual eyes, penetrating the city spiritually and presenting the eschatological city of God as the present reality that is impacting the world, although not without tensions and fights.

This is exactly our business now. I like to think that what we are doing is re-writing a chapter of the *City of God* for this century. And I like to think that Timothy Keller and the Redeemer movement are like the contemporary Augustine helping the global church re-write the *City of God*, planting churches in global cities, promoting a spiritual understanding of the city, and opening gospel workshops and experiments all over the major cities of the world.

As we consider the topic of identifying the idols of the city, we will proceed in three steps that follow the pattern of Paul at Athens in Acts 17.

1. SPIRITUAL INVOLVEMENT: EXPERIENCING GOSPEL PAROXYSM (ACTS 17:16)

Paroxysm refers to a sudden outburst of emotion or action. Identifying the idols of the city takes place in the untamed context of spiritual warfare. Those who are engaged in mapping the idolatry of the city know that this process is not simply a rational, cognitive, scholarly engagement. It is first and foremost a spiritual battle involving spiritual discernment. Acts 17:16 tells us that in Athens, Paul was “greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols.” He was spiritually disturbed. Unless we feel—we sense and experience—that sense of distress, uneasiness, and spiritual discomfort, all talk about idols will be meaningless.

To identify the idols of the city, there is no textbook that can do the job for you, no intensive workshop that can provide it, and no clever cultural analysis that is sufficient in and of itself. It is not the result of paperwork only. It is a matter of spiritual discernment in the context of spiritual warfare. It is a matter of having our spiritual senses geared to the spiritual condition of the city.

Paroxysm is not a pleasant feeling. It is altogether different from a romantic love for the city. It is different from a naïve approach to urbanization. Of course, cities are to be loved, but unless we experience that sense of spiritual angst for the city, that sense of unrest, that sting that punches us and makes us vulnerable, we will not be able to map the idols of the city.

Church planters are like cultural anthropologists who enter a culture to participate in it and study it. Unlike cultural anthropologists, though, church planters have a spiritual task to perform.

Willingness to pay the cost of spiritual participation is an essential ingredient towards identifying idols. Identifying the idols of the city requires spiritual suffering and pain.

If you don't know what it means to be spiritually distressed in the city, you will not last as a church planter, and you will not be in the spiritual condition to deal with city idols. There is nothing naïve about doing church planting. It's a matter of godly sorrow over the presence of idols.

Before categorizing the idols, we need to face them spiritually. Notice, this is not the general distress that most urban commuters experience over, say, the challenges of rush-hour traffic. It is a spiritual distress motivated by the presence of idols in the city. Paul saw the city full of idols. He could see them with his spiritual eyes. They were in the physical form of altars, statues, pictures, etc., but he could recognize the spiritual reality they represented.

You cannot buy spiritual discernment. It is conditioned by your relationship with God, the intensity of your spiritual life, and the health of your spiritual disciplines.

2. CULTURAL SATURATION AS FULL IMMERSION IN THE CITY: WALKING, SEEING, OBSERVING, TALKING, READING (ACTS 17)

Paul felt greatly distressed. His spiritual senses were alert, but his natural and cultural senses were also fully operational in discerning the city's idols. These senses were not awakened in Athens but had been alive prior to his visit.

A full range of searching activities was necessary to identify the idols. The assumption was that Paul paid the price of making cultural, social, and historical analyses of Athens. He gave time, energy, and his best abilities to try to understand the milieu in which he found himself. By several means, he searched for the soul of Athens.

- + *Paul sees the city* (v. 16). He is not happy to look at it merely as a tourist, but observes it with great care and interest. He looks around carefully (v. 23).

Looking around is a fruitful way to grasp the city, to feel it, to understand it. Go around the city with your eyes open, asking God to show it to you, to open it up for you.

- + *Paul reasons with people* (v. 17). This entails talking to them, listening, asking questions, conversing, and learning the art of searching by means of dialogue.

Talking to people is fundamental. By learning the language, the jargon, the slang, and the questions and concerns of the locality—and doing so with a large spectrum of people—you will learn where their hearts are, where their passions are, and what their problems are.

- + *He disputes with Stoics and Epicureans* (vv. 18–22). He confronts them, or they confront him.

This is engaging dialogue, critical interaction, and intellectual confrontation. Don't be afraid of apologetics. Paul speaks with people at the marketplace and with proud intellectuals in the academy. Both responsive and proactive apologetics in the Christian sense are necessary.

- + *He walks around the city* (v. 23). His walking is always a means to gain knowledge, perception, and perspective. There is a cultural curiosity, a searching spirit. He looks for religious artifacts and pieces of art, as well as places of gathering.

Walking around the city is key to identifying its idols. Walk everywhere at different hours with your eyes open and heart awake.

- + *Paul finds an altar to an unknown god* (v. 23). Though he perhaps has not followed the *Lonely Planet* guide and the prescribed tours of the city, Paul instead goes further, looking beyond what seems immediately fruitful.

Don't be content with the surface. Don't parrot the usual pictures and versions of the city. You have to discover something difficult to find, so keep looking for it.

- + *He quotes their literature* (v. 28). This, of course, implies that he had read it, or at least some of it. He seems to be familiar with some literary and philosophical works of Greek culture. He knows the Bible and he also knows the books of culture.

Observation is key to discerning the presence of idols in the city. Full immersion is indispensable. This requires reading the history of the city from different points of view. Becoming familiar with its maps, cultural history, geography, spirituality, politics, art, food, social dynamics, trends, demography, literature, institutionalized religion, movements, and so on, is part and parcel of the task. To identify city idols we should be culturally omnivorous, since idolatry is present everywhere in culture. It is a kind of perverse DNA of the city's culture, present in every aspect of it. We encounter idols in all kinds of different places. This is the reason why we should be alert and curious. A culturally lazy church planter is a contradiction in terms.

3. THEOLOGICAL INSIGHTFULNESS: EXEGETING THE *LOGISMOI* OF THE CITY (2 CORINTHIANS 10:4)

Spiritual/personal participation and cultural saturation are partners of the more theological aspect of singling out the idols of the city. In a sense, they are the background for the theological task. The spiritual battle and the amount of information gathered need to be conveyed in the theological understanding of the idolatry of the city. Cities need to be read spiritually; they need to be penetrated theologically.

Paul has seen, talked, read, etc., and he has understood that the city of Athens is full of idols. He says that Athenians are very religious (17:22). He singles out the objects of idolatry and their spiritual significance. Paul does not seem impressed by the outward forms of the idolatrous presence. He is not overly concerned by the way in which idols are displayed in figurative pictures and artifacts. He knows that idols “play” with their outward appearance, but the real goal is to trap people, preventing them from believing in the gospel and instead offering alternative narratives by which to live.

Idols are distorted and corrupted views of God and the world that take people captive and enslave them. In the case of Athens, idol-worship was a frame of thought that stirred people to believe that they could manage the gods, without any sense of resurrected life and final judgment.

I am not interested here in exploring the type of idolatry occurring in Athens. The make-up and mixture of idols can change from city to city, and it is the task of church planters to analyze and understand them if they want to know what they are to deconstruct and demythologize. Your homework is to be aware of the pagan theology of your city.

Elsewhere, Paul writes that our battle is “not against flesh and blood” (Eph. 6:12), but against the *logismoi* that are arrogant and contrary to the knowledge of God (2 Cor. 10:4). *Logismoi* are sinful systems of thought, evil ways of life, and religious but anti-Christian gospels that promise meaning, hope, and protection. *Logismoi* are worldviews that shape the city. They are social idols that capture the life of the city. They are overarching sinful narratives on which people rely.

We have to exegete them. We have to spot them out. We have to capture their core values, their history, their attractions, and the shape they have given to the city’s architecture, art, geography, monuments, squares, trends, habits, practices, procedures, codes, and institutions.

Idols like to take form in artifacts. Statues, pictures, images, and buildings are not in themselves idols but are masks for idols, interfaces for idols. Idols like to leave their traces behind them. Idols like to shape the city in a visible way. We have to grasp spiritually the theological skyline of the city.

Idols like to hide themselves behind symbols, places that nurture the culture of the city. What are the main monuments of the city? What are the main social habits of the city? What are the main liturgies of the city? What are the main businesses of the city? Where is there movement and interest? There, idols are likely to be found.

Idols like to inhabit peoples’ lives, their imaginations, their shared memory, and their collective hopes. In other words, what is the pagan theology of the city? Can we discern two or three or four articles of its evil confession of faith? Can we see in our cities symbolic places that embody those beliefs? Can we see in the dynamics of the city the results of that disruptive theology?

Spotting the theological skyline of the city and providing gospel alternatives belong to the same task. Cities are idolatrous places. Cities are tremendous places of spiritual warfare and meaningful apologetic. Church planting is key to demolishing the city’s *logismoi* and to building churches that would honor the triune God and his gospel through *logismoi* that are obedient to Christ.

From demonic bondage to gospel freedom, from the earthly, carnal city to the city of God: this should be our vision for European cities. I wish and pray that our cities of Europe, so trapped in idolatry, may know a season of reformation whereby idols are cast out and the only living God is recognized as the Creator and Savior of the world.

Let’s plant churches that are idol-destroying and God-honoring.

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