# OUR NEW GLOBAL CULTURE: MINISTRY IN URBAN CENTERS

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This paper surveys the rise of global cities, the culture and dominant worldviews within these cities, and a framework for ministering in them.

## I. INTRODUCTION: THE EMERGENCE, POWER, AND COMPLEXITY OF GLOBAL CITIES

The mobility of capital means national governments are now virtually powerless to control the flow of money in and out of their own economies, thus greatly decreasing their influence in general. Cities are the seats of international economic, social, and technological networks. Likewise, the technology and communication revolution means that national governments are increasingly powerless to control what their citizens watch or learn. As a result, the cultural values of world-class cities are being transmitted around the globe to all people groups, no matter how remote. The largest cities in each country—global cities—are becoming more alike and connected to one another than they are to the rest of their own countries. For example, New York and Los Angeles have become far more influential in forming the culture of teenagers in rural Indiana or rural Mexico than the national or local governments.

Cities are growing in the Third World at an enormous rate, and cities in Europe and the United States are regenerating. Even smaller cities in the United States have seen a resurgence of their downtown centers, as professionals, immigrants, international business leaders, empty-nest baby boomers, artists, and hipsters move back in. The coming world order will be global, multicultural, and urban.

According to Neal Peirce, "Great metropolitan regions—not cities, not states, not even nation states—are starting to emerge as the world's most influential players."[1]  These metropolitan regions, or nerve centers of global cities, are what I refer to in this article as the city center or urban center. In New York City, for example, Manhattan is considered the urban center, the heart and nerve center of all five boroughs of the city. The city center, unlike the "inner city" or the working-class neighborhoods, is where there is a confluence of  professionals, major industry and financial centers, and major cultural institutions all in close proximity. Residents include young, single, up-and-coming corporate professionals and creative professionals, as well as leaders in business, finance, academia, and the arts who create alliances to run the major cultural institutions of society. Residents also include new immigrant families, whose members work and live near the city centers, and their second-generation children seeking professional success. Finally, city center residents include large numbers of students, as well as those of alternative lifestyles, such as the gay community.

The cultures of urban centers in different hemispheres are surprisingly similar. They share many daily connections, and their residents travel back and forth between them. Thus, ministry leaders from other cities in the world find the culture of New York City to be similar to their own global city, and the ministry of Redeem-

1. Neal Peirce, "The 'Citistates' Are on the Rise, and the Competition Is Fierce," *The Philadelphia Inquirer,* 26 July 1993, A11, quoted in Harvie M. Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 182.

er Presbyterian Church to be a model for church planting projects in the global cities of their country. This article outlines specific ministry applications for churches in urban centers.

## II. VARIOUS WORLDVIEWS FOUND IN URBAN CENTERS

Since global cities incubate the trends in world culture, it is important to know the mindset and attitudes of city-center inhabitants. What are the dominant worldviews?

### THE LIMITATIONS OF THE MODERN VS. POSTMODERN CATEGORIES

There seems to be a widespread generalization that baby boomers have a more modern mindset and that subsequent generations (Generations X and Y) are postmodern. Therefore, ministry needs to reflect the understanding of cultural shifts in attitudes and outlook. At its simplest, the shift from modern to postmodern is characterized by the following traits:

+ Moderns are rational and cognitive; postmoderns are more experiential and intuitive.

+ Moderns are secular and anti-spiritual; postmoderns are more open to the spiritual and mystical.

+ Moderns are more hard-line liberal or conservative; postmoderns are less ideologically rigid.

+ Moderns are individualistic; postmoderns are more oriented to community and friendship.

It is important to note that these generalizations are more largely true among Anglos, who experienced the exaltation of science and the absolute freedom of the individual over family and community. Younger African Americans, Latinos, and Asians did not receive as strong a dose of the Enlightenment as did the Anglo culture, and therefore do not react as severely against modernity, since they never were as rationalistic and individualistic as other predominantly white European groups.

### THE DECLINE OF POSTMODERNISM

In academic circles postmodernism is now seen as a spent force, and the European thinkers who developed the deconstructionism of the 1970s and 1980s are seen as passé. At a 1997 conference at the University of Chicago, the question was posed: "If we absorb postmodernism…but do not want to stop in arbitrariness, relativism, or aphoria, what comes *after* postmodernism?"[2]  *The New York Times* reported that postmodern theory was dead, largely because it did not give anyone the basis for calling oppression and injustice wrong.[3]

As a result, there are many efforts—probably too inchoate to be called a movement as yet—seeking to get beyond both the modern idolization of individual consciousness and the postmodern idolization of community. N.T. Wright refers to the "naïve realism" of pre-modern times, the "positivist realism" of modernism, the "anti-realism" of postmodernity, and the "critical realism" that is now emerging.[4]  This is a view asserting that we can know truth, though only partially and after a great deal of humble, critical reflection. In an essay titled "The Future of the University: From Postmodern to Transmodern,"[5]  Paul Vitz termed this new way "transmodern" to convey the fact that practitioners of music, art, literature, and architecture are trying to move beyond both the rationalism of modernism and the fragmentation of postmodernism.[6]

2. In The Focusing Institute, http://www.focusing.org/apm.htm#Online%20Papers (accessed 4/16/09).

3. Emily Eakin, "The Latest Theory Is That Theory Doesn't Matter," *The New York Times* (April 19, 2003).

4. See N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992) among other works.

5. Paul C. Vitz, "The Future of the University: From Postmodern to Transmodern." In *Rethinking the Future of the University,* eds. David Lyle Jeffrey and Dominic Manganiello. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1998), 113.

6. See also "A Requiem for Postmodernism—Whither Now?" by James Parker III. In *Reclaiming the Center: Confronting Evangelical Accommodation in Postmodern Times,* by Millard J. Erickson, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and Justin Taylor (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004).

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## THE MERGING OF MULTIPLE WORLDVIEWS

The cultural reality in city centers is that *all* the worldviews—traditional, modern, postmodern, and post-postmodern—exist in significant strength. Global city centers are complex salad bowls of all worldviews. The traditional worldview will be especially present among first-generation immigrants. The modern worldview will be especially present among Anglos, middle-aged people, and those working primarily in business and science. The postmodern worldview will be especially present among younger Anglos and those in the arts. The post-postmodern worldview is seen in younger non-Anglos and in today's teenagers.

### Traditional Worldview

This will be the predominant view of people from the South and Midwestern regions of the United States, small town residents, blue collar employees, first-generation immigrants from non-Western countries, as well as people aged seventy or older. In the traditional worldview, one's social and familial obligations define him or her. The conscience, more than feelings or reason, is the "real you." One has a duty to his or her family and finds meaning and significance in fulfilling that. There is little talk of "finding" oneself, but rather of fulfilling one's role within the social structure.

+ *Identity*: Duty to social and family structures.
+ *Meaning of Life*: To be good.
+ *Major Felt Need*: Concern for traditional values. How can I get the strength to be a good person? How can I overcome the feelings of guilt over ways I have failed?
+ *Value*: Give me the right thing to do, and I will do it.
+ *Relationships:* The most important relationships are with those to whom one is born, such as family, clan, and long-time neighbors. The primary relationship is a family one.
+ *Persuasion:* Concrete thinkers. Show me how this produces good character, and I'll believe it.
+ *Idols:* Authority. Prone to duty-bound moralism, and racism.
+ *Ministry Contextualization*: Contextualizing the gospel to traditional people is preaching that sin is falling short of the glory of God. Only in Jesus can we be both forgiven and made righteous.
+ *Challenge to the Worldview:* The gospel of grace. Religion is as much a form of self-salvation as immorality and irreligion. Sin is self-salvation, not just breaking the rules. If anything, religion is a greater barrier to real conversion and life change than is irreligion.

### Modern Worldview

This includes people from the Northeast and West Coast, as well as suburbs and exurbs of the United States. It also includes college educated baby boomers and those in corporate rather than creative professions. In the modern worldview, one's deepest passions and desires define him or her. Feelings are more the "real you" than your duties or even your thinking. One has a duty to discover his or her deepest feelings and dreams and finds meaning and significance in fulfilling that. The rights, freedom, and fulfillment of the individual are far more important than the needs of a group or family.

+ *Identity:* Personal meaning and fulfillment.
+ *Meaning of Life:* To be free, and therefore happy.
+ *Major Felt Need*: Concern for individual human rights and freedom. How can I be free? How can I be setfree to find my truest self and pursue my greatest passions?
+ *Value*: Give me what I need to fulfill my personal goals and vision.
+ *Relationships:* The most important relationships are with those who help us get to our personal goals, those who give us good feelings and emotions. The primary relationship is a sexual one. We love others by freeing them to be themselves.

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+ *Persuasion:* Rational thinkers. If you can prove it to me and give me enough reasons, I'll believe it. In general, moderns are not open to the idea of the supernatural or miracles, and they tend to see religion of any kind as a barrier to scientific and social progress.

+ *Idols:* Moderns experience a wide range of idols, from feelings ("If I feel it, I must not go against it") to individualism ("I decide what is right or wrong for me") to implicit moralism ("I save myself by achieving") to science and reason.

+ *Ministry Contextualization:* Contextualizing the gospel for moderns involves preaching true freedom, "You know you should be free, but you aren't. Only in Jesus will you have a Lord who does not enslave you and who became a ransom to buy you out of slavery."

+ *Challenge to the Worldview:* The gospel of the kingdom. Show how secular people are just as religious and ultimately just as enslaved and self-saving as the moralistic religious people they despise. Call them to forsake old masters and come into a new kingdom based on service. Show how it is belief in the gospel, not just trying harder, that is the solution to every problem.

### Postmodern Worldview

This includes people from the Northeast and Western regions of the United States, especially those in urban areas. In addition, postmoderns include college educated twenty-five to forty-five year olds and the "creative class."[7] The underlying premise of the postmodern worldview is that there is no true identity to be accepted or discovered. There is no core essence, either moral or psychological, to which to be true.[8] One's identity is pieced together and is constantly changing. There is little talk of "finding" oneself but rather of *creating* oneself.

+ *Identity:* There is no true identity to be accepted or discovered.

+ *Meaning of Life:* We have to find our own way. There is no overarching purpose (or if there is we can't know it). So many visions for the world are seen as being power plays.

+ *Major Felt Need:* Concern for social justice. How can such totally different and diverse people live together in peace? How can community be built in a deeply pluralistic world?

+ *Value:* Give me something that moves me, because so little does.

+ *Relationships:* The most important relationships are the people we are committed to (a reaction against the seemingly disposable selfish relationships of modernists). The primary relationship is friendship. We love others through acceptance and not judging them. In general, a deep hunger for community.

+ *Persuasion:* Pragmatists. Show me that this works and builds community, and I'll believe it. In general, postmoderns are not as rational or linear in their thinking as moderns, and are therefore much more open to story and mystery. While they are not as skeptical of the supernatural or spiritual, they tend to see the church as a historically oppressive power.

+ *Idols:* Postmodernist idols include cynicism, inclusion, and moralism. The idol of cynicism shows itself as an unwillingness to commit to any idea or truth or cause—just to friends. The idol of inclusion reveals an unwillingness to confront or take a stand for truth, since no one can ever be made to feel like an outsider. Moralism is demonstrated by the insidious, cynicism-driven pride that you are the only one who's not a phony.

+ *Ministry Contextualization:* Show how the gospel embraces "the other," those who are different from us. Christianity is the only faith that has at its heart a man dying for his enemies, giving up power, becoming a servant, and forgiving us rather than destroying us. Preach grace as the great reversal of values.

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7. See Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

8. See Kenneth Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

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+ *Challenge to the Worldview:* The gospel of the cross. The cross is *not* pragmatic—it doesn't "work" for us. Belief in Christ means admitting there is truth, but the only kind of truth that won't oppress us. When we give up power to the One who gave up power for us, it becomes our only non-exploitative relationship.

### Post-Postmodern Worldview

This group includes non-Anglo children of immigrants and those under twenty-five years of age. Although a term has not been agreed upon for this emerging group, it is clear for reasons listed above that postmodernism is declining as a dominant worldview. I think the post-postmodern or transmodern person will reject the skepticism of modernity, which does not believe anything unless it is empirically proven, as well as the subjectivism of postmodernity, which does not believe there is any way to know that one belief is truer than any other belief. Will this be a neo-traditionalism? Will it be a compromise between modern and postmodern?

## III. MARKS OF PEOPLE LIVING IN GLOBAL CITIES

Can we speak of the marks of city-center culture if it reflects not only diversity of ethnicities but also diversities of worldviews? Yes. City-center culture may be a salad bowl, but it has two dominant ingredients—modern and postmodern worldviews—interacting and blending in different ways. The following are general characteristics of those living in city centers, as well as ministry implications that result from these traits.

### PROFESSIONALLY DRIVEN

The city center embodies a culture of expertise. People who work in city centers are usually highly educated, highly skilled overachievers. People who work in city centers tend to inhabit their careers and give them more prominence than family or other competing social structures. In addition, the high cost of living in urban centers is such that most people have to work hard to make enough money to stay there. Ministry implications for a culture of career-minded professionals include the following:

+ Artistic quality is very important. Amateurish art and music will not go over well, especially with the high percentage of city residents who are themselves artists.
+ High quality visual and graphic elements are also important.
+ Communication must be high in quality and intelligence.
+ Because city-center people do not have much in the way of private lives, discipleship must involve integrating one's faith and work. Discipleship must demonstrate how to be distinctively Christian within one's job, including how to handle peculiar temptations and ethical quandaries, how to produce work from a distinctly Christian worldview, and how to help other Christians in the industry do their work excellently.

### SEXUALLY ENGAGED

People living in urban centers are not only very sexually active but also very insistent that their sexuality is nobody else's business but theirs. Even strong Christians will be tempted to be sexually active in various ways that can undermine or destroy their spiritual effectiveness. Ministry implications include the following:

+ A lack of prudishness in talking about sex.
+ A strong teaching emphasis on the Christian understanding of sex, in which sex was designed for lifetime commitment and community building instead of personal gratification.
+ Teaching that is smart, sensitive, irenic, nuanced, and carefully assimilates existing cultural narratives about freedom, identity, and community within the confines of biblical teaching.

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## CONSUMER ORIENTED

While traditional culture enjoyed robust communities in which identity was realized through one's role in the family and society, modern and postmodern culture thins out community through mobility. This fragmentation of community frees individuals to create their own identities and achieve their own significance. It also, however, leaves people vulnerable to consumerism, in which they obtain status by purchasing things. Consumer-oriented identities turn everything, including church, into a commodity. This, along with people living "in" their careers, poses an enormous challenge to the church. City-center people will spend most of their time achieving an identity in work, accruing wealth, and "consuming" church programs that help them along the way, instead of identifying with the church community and changing the lives of others through sharing their wealth. Ministry implications, then, include the need for great teaching and a strong emphasis on the importance of community.

## GEOGRAPHICALLY AND SOCIALLY ROOTLESS

Modern capitalism uproots people from their geography in the quest for work and money. The predominating modern worldview disdains the past and tends to make people feel historically rootless.[9] Ministry implications for a rootless population include:

+ Demonstrating historical rootedness in music, liturgy, and worship style. Both traditional and postmodern people are interested in the historic roots of the church. Liturgical renewal and eclectic music (opera, classical, jazz, and gospel) are better at providing these roots than contemporary worship music.

+ Recognizing the critical importance and accessibility of small groups as the infrastructure needed to support Christians living long term in urban centers.

## PRAGMATIC THINKERS

People living within urban centers are generally pragmatic rather than rational or linear in their thinking. Modernism elevated action over contemplation, while postmodernism created enormous skepticism about reasoning and truth. Together they have created a culture in which people believe that something is true only if it works for them. Ministry, then, requires that the Bible be taught narratively—the mission of God to redeem creation through Jesus—not merely as a body of information. Ministry implications include:

+ Creation of community, because according to Jesus in John 17, a loving community is a crucial apologetic.

+ Use of a variety of art to embody our message, not merely give talks containing long strings of logic.

+ Challenging pragmatism at every turn. If people believe in Christ because it "works" for them, they have fitted Christ to their individualistic worldview rather than fitting their worldview to Christ.

## NATURALLY SUSPICIOUS

City-center people tend to be suspicious of authority and institutions, especially religious ones. Overly slick, polished, or glossy presentations are suspect. Sentimentality, earnestness, and "niceness" seem phony and manipulative. There is disdain for the obvious in art and communication. Ministry implications involve:

+ Abstaining from worship that is bathetic, syrupy, or manipulative.

+ An intentional effort on the part of the leadership to be open, not hiding information or being political.

+ Being respectful to doubters.

+ Keeping the communication tone free from evangelical tribal jargon.

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9. Pico Iyer coined the term "Nowherians" in his book *Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home* Knopf, 2000.

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+ Understanding that humor is extremely important, but using gentle, humble irony, not broad or cutting humor.
+ Admitting how faith and religion can be used to oppress people and showing that the gospel is the strongest critique of religion.

## ETHNICALLY DIVERSE

City-center culture is very multiethnic and international, much more so than suburbs or even inner city areas. Therefore, it is crucial for urban-center churches to be as deliberately multiethnic as possible and to promote and celebrate unity in Christ as evidence of the gospel's power. The more dominant cultural groups must humble themselves and stretch to make room for those not well represented. Great care must be taken not to allow the church to become too beholden to one political party or political agenda, or cultural diversity will be hard to maintain (and evangelism will be hard to do). At the same time, each multiethnic church will be unavoidably different from each other, because the ethnic makeup of each church will differ.

## CIVIC MINDED

City-center people are deeply concerned for justice and the poor (at least in principle.) Because of their international connections and education, those living in global cities tend to be less parochial and more committed to helping the poor. Their jobs and consumer identities, however, prevent them from much concrete action on behalf of others. Ministry implications include the following:

+ Showing how the gospel is the faith of choice for the poor of the world, who much more readily embrace Jesus.
+ Demonstrating the resources the Christian faith has for having hope in the future. At the end of the Bible, we don't see individuals being taken out of the world into heaven, but rather heaven coming down to renew the world and cleanse it of poverty, evil, disease, injustice, and death.
+ Working to really make a difference for the city's poor instead of simply engaging in the typical charity and volunteer programs.
+ Upholding a positive view of the city. Tell people the purpose of ministry is not simply to create a great church but a great city. The church is there for the common good of the whole city (Jer. 29:4–7).

# IV. MINISTRY MARKS OF CHURCHES IN GLOBAL CITIES

## CONTEXTUALIZE THE GOSPEL MESSAGE TO VARIOUS WORLDVIEWS

The basic worldview of a person or a culture is an answer to the question, "What is really wrong with the world (or people or life), and how can it be fixed?" As noted earlier, every culture and generation has a worldview or narrative. The job of the pastor is to enter sympathetically into the worldview story of the culture, yet challenge and retell the culture's story so its people that see their story will only be fulfilled in Jesus.

### The Gospel As Alternative To Religion

Show that religious people are running from God as much as the nonreligious. Religion and irreligion are just two different ways of accomplishing the same thing—being one's own savior and lord.[10] Religion operates on the principle that "If I live like this, I'll be saved or blessed." The gospel operates on the principle that "I am saved or blessed in Christ; therefore, I will live like this."

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10. For a more in-depth discussion of this topic, see Timothy Keller, *The Prodigal God* (New York: Dutton, 2008).

Religion motivates through fear and pride, but the gospel motivates through grace and joy. These are two radically different paths, although the adherents of each sit in church pews together each week, both striving to be good but for completely different reasons. Religion produces either superiority, if we've lived up to our standards, or inferiority if we haven't, but either way we are driven by radical insecurity. Religion also leads us to exclude others who are not as righteous as we are. The difference between a Pharisee and a Christian is not repentance for sins. Pharisees repent of sins. A Christian, however, repents of self-righteousness and self-salvation. We need to repent not only for the bad things we've done, but also for the reasons we've done all the good things—to control God and save ourselves. To understand our inherent self-salvation strategies is to realize radical conversion. It puts our identities and all our relationships on new footing.

Every culture tends toward its own kind of religion and self-salvation structures. Traditional culture makes a savior out of family and being good. Modern culture makes a savior out of individual fulfillment. Post-modern culture makes a savior out of group identity and inclusion. All, however, will lead to exclusion and radical insecurity. Those from traditional cultures need this message, or they will settle into moralism and self-righteousness. Those with modern and postmodern worldviews need to hear this message, since while they may think they have rejected Christianity, they have actually rejected some form of religion. If they are not given the chance to understand the difference between religion and the gospel, they will never give real Christian faith a chance.

Religion is the default mode of the human heart. Christians who know the gospel in principle continually revert to religion. They believe the gospel at one level but at deeper levels continue to operate as if they are saved by works; they continue to base their standing with God and their view of themselves on spiritual and moral performance. This leads to anxiety, pride, inferiority, anger, and spiritual deadness.

### The Gospel As Alternative to Other Identity Structures

Show that the secular or nonreligious are just as spiritually enslaved as the religious. Idolatry is building our identity—finding our greatest meaning, significance, and security—on something besides God. Every-one centers his or her life on something, and whatever that is becomes by definition and function our god (something we adore and serve with our whole heart) and our savior (something we must have to feel spiritually and emotionally significant). Even the most seemingly nonreligious people are living lives of worship and are working for their "salvation," although not expressing it in these terms.

Inwardly, this way of forming identity leads to slavery, because we are driven to achieve the things we must have to be happy. If we build our lives on human approval, we are slaves to the opinion of others. If we build our lives on academic or economic or artistic achievement, we are slaves to our careers. In any case, we do not control ourselves; rather, we are controlled by what we live for. When we make even the best things (family, work, romance, etc.) into ultimate things and ways to gain joy and significance, then they drive us into the ground because we must have them. If we lose a good thing, it makes us sad. If, however, we lose an ultimate thing (an idol), it devastates us.

Outwardly, this way of forming identity leads us to oppress and exclude "the other," because we must disdain those who do not have the same identity factors we have. If we build our identity on being very hardworking or moral, we must disdain those who we perceive to be lazy or immoral. If we build our identity on social class or race, we must disdain those of different classes or ethnicities. But the gospel shows us that Jesus is the only Savior and Lord who will fulfill us and will forgive us when we fail. If we live for career success and fail, our career will not forgive us. Rather, our failure will punish us with self-disdain. But Jesus gave his life as a ransom for us; this ransom is the payment that releases us from captivity and slavery.

Modern and postmodern people must be given this perfectly biblical definition of sin. If we define sin only as "breaking God's law," contemporary people will not be able to identify themselves as sinners. They will say, for example, "Who is to say that extramarital sin is wrong? I don't think it is wrong to have sex if you really love one another." But if we define sin more broadly—as false identity and idolatry, as making anything, even a good thing, into an ultimate thing—then we give modern and postmodern listeners a concept of sin they are familiar with (addiction) and cannot so easily dismiss as irrelevant.

### The Gospel As True Identity Structure

Show how Christ's redemption restores identity and community. Both religious moralism and nonreligious idolatry lead to an unstable identity, superiority, and exclusion of those who are different from us. The gospel gives us an unassailably confident and gentle identity, which frees us to embrace "the other" in love. Religion and non-religion lead to an unstable identity (insecurity resulting in either arrogant superiority or fearful inferiority), because significance is bound up in performance or achievement. This means we are humble but not confident when failing our standards, or confident but proud when living up to standards. We will never be sure we've arrived, however, so we are always driven and nervous. But the gospel makes us humble because we are such sinners that Christ had to die for us, and yet also makes us bold because we are so loved that Jesus was glad to die for us. We are sinfully and hopelessly wretched, yet also unbelievably loved and accepted.

Religion and non-religion lead to superiority and disdain toward "the other." If our identity is based on being productive and efficient, we feel superior to those we consider lazy or inefficient. If our identity is based on being open-minded and liberal, we feel superior to those we consider conservatives. It all leads to exclusion. But the gospel is that on the cross Christ fulfilled God's righteous law (unlike the relativist mindset, there are absolute moral standards by which you evaluate others), and on the cross he did it all for me (unlike the moralist mindset, there can be no superiority or haughtiness toward anyone, since we are saved by sheer grace). At the heart of the gospel is not a teacher whose standards we live up to, but a savior who died for his enemies and who embraced "the other," including us.

Modern people, in particular, are concerned with finding the freedom to discover their individual identities. Postmodern people, in particular, are concerned with how we can live at peace in a pluralistic world. There is no religion with a more powerful example for accepting others than the Christian faith. It is the only faith that has at its heart a man dying for his enemies, forgiving them rather than destroying them. This must be presented to our culture as an unparalleled resource for living in peace in a pluralistic society.

### The Gospel As the Key to Joy and Transformation

Why do we do the wrong things we do? Look at the Ten Commandments. The first and most primary commandment is to have no other gods besides God. The implication is that we would never break one of the other nine commandments unless we are breaking the first commandment. We don't lie, commit adultery, or steal unless we first make something other than Jesus more fundamental to our happiness. A lack of joy in what Jesus has done for us, or unbelief, is always the root behind our failures to live as we should.

When we lie, for example, it is because our reputation is more foundational to our sense of self and happiness than the love of Christ. We always sin because at that moment we don't really believe the gospel—that we are completely accepted in Christ. We are looking to something else to be what only Jesus can be to us. We are trusting something else as savior. Put another way, it is always a lack of joy—the absence of deep joy and rest in Christ's love and work for us—that is the reason we do wrong. If we were content enough, we would not need to sin.

Christians may believe the gospel at one level but at deeper levels continue to look to other things besides Jesus to feel justified. Even after we are converted by the gospel, we still go back to operating on this religious principle, unless we deliberately and repeatedly set it to gospel mode. The gospel, then, is not just the elementary ABCs of the Christian life, but the comprehensive A to Z of the Christian life. This is radical! We don't believe the gospel to become saved, and then move on to more advanced principles to grow. All of our personal problems and church problems arise when we do not continually go back to the gospel, believe it to be true, and work it out in our lives.

Therefore, we must realize our powerlessness to change our hearts through willpower, moral reformation, or even theological application. Ultimately, our hearts can only change as we allow the gospel to become the basic operating mode of our hearts—to change the main things we put our hearts' greatest hopes in, the main things we find our hearts' deepest joys and glories in. Both modern and postmodern people have rejected the Christian faith because of what they perceive to be its inner joylessness. The gospel motivation for moral behavior fits neither the traditionalist's duty-driven view of life nor the postmodern's self-driven view of life. It breaks the categories, because it calls people to die to themselves and yet it promises inner joy.

## INCARNATE WORSHIP INTO NON-ABSTRACT CULTURE

Contemporary culture has little patience for long strings of logic or for abstract thinking in general. It prefers the visual, the narrative, and the intuitive over the propositional and the rational. There must be a balance here. God gave us a book of words rather than music or painting; it can be expected, then, that much about Christianity will encourage discursive thought. Truth is not less than propositional (specific statements that are either true or false) but quite a bit more. Nevertheless, the doctrine of the incarnation and the forms of the Bible give us a lot of resources for appealing to a non-abstract culture, especially in worship.

### With Christ-Centered Preaching

As noted earlier, people in our society tend to respond to narrative and story more than the older kind of preaching that simply enunciates doctrinal principles. Neither will they be as excited about the newer, user-friendly sermons, such as "How to Handle Fear," "How to Balance Your Life," etc. There is a danger, however, that postmodern preaching will devolve into what is, for the most part, poetic storytelling rather than expounding the truth.

In Luke 24 we learn that every single part of the Bible is really about Jesus. The Christ-centered preaching approach sees the whole Bible as one big story with a central plot: God restores the world lost in Eden by intervening in history to call out and form a new humanity. This intervention climaxes in Jesus Christ, who accomplishes salvation for us, which we could not accomplish for ourselves. While only a minority of biblical passages provide the entire storyline, every biblical text must be placed within the complete story to be understood. In other words, to be understood every text must be asked, "What does this tell me about the salvation we have in Christ?" This understanding of preaching, then, turns all preaching into narrative preaching, even if it is an exposition of Deuteronomy, Proverbs, or James. Every sermon is a story in which the plot of the human dilemma thickens and the hero who comes to the rescue is Jesus.

### With Experiential Preaching

People in our society do not just want intellectual propositions. For them, life's meaning is grounded in what they experience. If we understand that the purpose of preaching is not only to make the truth clear but also to make the truth real to the hearts of listeners, we will have a kind of preaching that is committed to objective truth and, at the same time, deeply experiential.

The "informational" view of preaching conceives of preaching as changing people's lives *after the sermon.* They listen to the sermon, take notes, and then apply the biblical principles during the week. But this approach assumes that our main problem is a lack of compliance to biblical principles, when, as we saw above, all our problems are actually due to a lack of joy and belief in the gospel. Our real problem is that Jesus' salvation is not as real to our hearts as the significance and security our idols promise us. If that's our real problem, then the purpose of preaching is to make Christ so real to the heart that *during the sermon* we have an experience of his grace, and the false saviors that drive us lose their power and grip on us at that moment. That's the "experiential" view of preaching.[11]

The only way to cultivate true honesty and repentance is to show Jesus dying for us, keeping a promise he made despite the unfathomable suffering it brought him. That destroys pride, since he had to do this for us because we are so lost. It also destroys fear, because if he would do this for us while we were enemies of his, then he valued us infinitely, and nothing we can do will wear out his love. Our hearts, then, are not just restrained but transformed.

Most preaching (in both conservative and liberal churches) is moralistic and informational. It tells people how they should behave and live, but it implies, often through silence, that the reason they should live like this is so God will bless them, so they will go to heaven, and so their lives will work better. The fundamental questions every sermon should address are these two questions:

+ "Why do we have trouble living right?" *Answer*: Because in some way we don't really believe the gospel, or rest and rejoice in who Jesus is and what he did for us.
+ "Why should we live this particular way?" *Answer:* Because Jesus lived this way for us at infinite cost, and this removes our need to live in any other way.

### With Artistic Excellence

Before we sail into choppy waters on this touchy subject, let me say that I do not believe there is just one style of worship that will reach everyone in city centers. City centers, as we have seen, are the most culturally diverse places on earth. That said, here are a few general characteristics of worship styles:

+ Classical music and liturgy appeal to highly educated and older people. High cultural forms are those that, by definition, require training to appreciate.
+ Praise and worship approaches are far more likely to bring together a diversity of racial groups, such as black, Latino, and Asian.
+ Younger professional Anglos, especially of the artistic bent, are attracted to the "fusion" of liturgical and historical elements with the most contemporary musical forms.
+ Baby boomer families are more attracted to "seeker-sensitive" worship styles and the more sentimental, earlier Christian contemporary songs.
+ I see some real potential in the movement of what could be called "fusion" worship, which combines rich liturgical and sacramental worship with both classical and contemporary music.

Postmoderns' need for roots, narrative, and experience is not met well by ahistorical, seeker-sensitive, contemporary worship, often deemed "cheesy" by postmodern seekers. The postmodern skepticism and fear of emotional manipulation takes offense at sentimental, charismatic, contemporary worship. A fusion of worship styles, with its willingness to mix in contemporary elements, will make it more accessible than a straight liturgical style. Beware of going overboard, however. For example, some churches will meet in a warehouse with icons on the wall and lit candles everywhere—all to evoke a sense of tradition, history, timelessness, and mystery—while often these churches are not embedded in any actual tradition. Unless the churches become embedded in a genuine ecclesial and theological tradition, such as

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11. See the works of Jonathan Edwards.

Reformed, Anglican, Orthodox, Catholic, Lutheran, Methodist, they won't last. The pastiche of traditional elements will not cohere, and they ultimately serve as a kind of marketing gimmick. It should be noted that the strength and power of African Anglicanism shows that the liturgical can be combined with emotionally expressive and contemporary music, such that this "ecumenical fusion" may have a bright future as world Christianity increasingly becomes non-white.

## CREATE A MISSIONAL MINDSET THAT SHAPES CHRISTIANS AND INCLUDES NON-CHRISTIANS

In Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14:23–25, we see nonbelievers attracted and challenged by worship. From this we learn that nonbelievers are expected in worship and should find worship to be challenging and comprehensible, not comfortable. In urban centers, which have a mixture of worldviews, it is crucial to include both Christians and non-Christians in the same service, as well as in many of the other meetings and ministries of the church. In a mixed group, when the preacher speaks somewhat more directly to non-Christians, the Christians present learn how to share their faith. This is extremely important today, as it becomes increasingly difficult for Christians to share the gospel without doing apologetics. The old, canned, quickie-training programs cannot prepare a Christian for dealing with the range of intellectual and personal difficulties people have with the Christian faith. They need to hear the preacher dealing winsomely and intelligently with the problems of nonbelievers week in and week out. This provides excellent training.

On the other hand, when the preacher speaks more directly to Christians, the non-Christians present come to see how Christianity "works." More deeply secular, postmodern non-Christians tend to decide about the faith on more pragmatic grounds. They do not examine it in a detached intellectual way; they are much more likely to make their commitment through a long process of mini-decisions. They will want to try Christianity on, see how it fits their problems, and understand how it fleshes out in real life. In short, an urban-center church should not simply "do mission" or "do evangelism." Every part of ministry should be geared routinely to including non-Christians and expecting them to overhear what we say and do. How do we accomplish this?

### Maintain a Measure of Excellence

Keeping the ministry quality very high—in speaking, music, and program—is more inclusive. For example, if you know a musician personally but the musician isn't very good, you still get something out of the musical offering. If you don't know the musician and the music isn't good, you usually get nothing out of it. The better the quality of the art, the more inclusive it is to outsiders and guests.

### Discourse in the Vernacular

Use common vernacular when conducting worship, preaching, teaching, and small groups. Postmodern people are extremely sensitive to anything that smacks of artifice to them. Anything that is too polished, too controlled, or too canned seems like salesmanship. They will be turned off if they hear the preacher use non-inclusive gender language, or make cynical remarks about other religions, or use tones of voice they consider artificial. Do not avoid the use of biblical terminology, but take great pains to explain such terms in ways that are readily understandable to those without a theological background. Especially avoid citing the Bible or making explanations with the tone of "Everyone intelligent knows this."

Avoid sentimental, pompous, austere, archaic, colloquial, or emotionally manipulative "inspirational talk." Avoid tribal language that is unnecessarily stylized, evangelical pious jargon, and outdated language that seeks to set a spiritual tone. Avoid "we-they" verbiage, such as disdainful jokes that mock people of different beliefs, and dismissive, disrespectful comments about those who may not agree with "us." Instead, engage people with the gentle, self-deprecating but joyful irony the gospel creates. There is a true "gospel-irony" and realism that is a blend of humility and joy.

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**Use Inclusive Speech**

Speak in a way that includes Christians and non-Christians in the same meetings. Keep emotion and sentimentality under control. The average educated non-Christian feels excluded by intense emotion in the service. Do not assume everyone shares the same premises. Constantly lay groundwork statements about the authority of the Bible or the reasons we believe. We must simultaneously address non-Christians and Christians, almost doing dialogue with them. "If you are committed to Christ, you may be thinking this, but the text answers that fear." Or, "If you are not a Christian or not sure what you believe, then you surely must find this narrow-minded, but the text, which says such and such, speaks to this very issue."

Teaching should be grounded in cultural references and authorities the listeners trust. It is critical to "keep up" in order to preach in New York City and other urban centers. In general, my audience does not trust the Bible very much, so I need to generously document and support my points with corroborating opinions from all the books and periodicals that the professionals of New York City read. If I read what they read, then I can use the Bible to answer the questions that are on their minds and I can often show that the Bible already taught this long before the contemporary authority said it.

In general, talk as if nonbelievers are present, even if they aren't. Always expect to be overheard by non-believers. Continually address concerns of the wider community, not just of the Christians. Show how the grace of God favors the poor and outsiders. Celebrate deeds of justice and mercy and common citizenship in the community.

Constantly anticipate and address the concerns, objections, and reservations of the skeptical or "spiritual pilgrims" with the greatest respect and sympathy. Express doubting points of view persuasively and respectfully before you answer them. Try to direct one of the three or four sermon points primarily toward nonbelievers. Keep in mind a list of the biggest objections people have to Christianity. More often than not, the particular text has some way to address at least one of these objections.

If we speak and discourse as if our whole neighborhood were present, eventually more and more of our neighbors will find their way in or be invited. By speaking in this way, Christians will feel free to include church events as part of their friendship building. What we want is for a Christian to come to our church and say, " I wish my non-Christian friend could see or hear this!" If this is forgotten, even a growing church will soon be filled with Christians who commute in from various towns and communities far and wide, rather than filling up with Christians and seekers from our church's immediate neighborhoods.

At the root of all failures to live rightly—not giving generously, not telling the truth, not caring for the poor, not handling worry and anxiety—is the sin under all sins, the sin of unbelief, of not rejoicing deeply in God's grace, of not living out of our new identity in Christ. This means that every week in a different way, the minister must apply the gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ's work. Thus, every week non-Christians are exposed to the gospel in its most practical and varied forms (not just in a repetitive, formulaic way), which is what pragmatic postmoderns need.

The above does not apply to worship services alone. Everything about the church ministries needs to assume it is encountering people from varied worldviews. It will take multiple exposures to the gospel in numerous perspectives before worldview change occurs. We assume people of different worldviews will be present in most aspects of the church's life. Therefore, we do not simply need churches that have evangelism programs tacked onto a congregation that in every other regard assumes the presence of conservative, traditional people; rather, we need missional churches. That means that every part of the church is being contextualized and adapted to a culture of people who have modern and postmodern sensibilities.

## A CASE STUDY OF MISSIONAL MINISTRY: SMALL GROUPS

Let me show you how this goes beyond any program. A missional church has an outward focus to everything. What, for example, makes a small group missional? A missional small group is not necessarily one that is doing some kind of specific evangelism program (though that is to be recommended.) Rather, its members love the city and their specific neighborhood and talk positively about them. They speak in language that is not filled with pious, tribal, or technical terms and phrases, nor in disdainful and embattled language. In their Bible study, they apply the gospel to the core concerns and stories of the culture. They are obviously interested in and engaged with the literature, art, and thought of the surrounding culture and can discuss it appreciatively yet critically. They exhibit deep concern for the poor, generosity with their money, purity and respect toward the opposite sex, and humility toward people of other races and cultures. They do not put down or diminish other Christians and churches.

If these characteristics are practiced and nurtured, seekers and non-believing people from the city will be invited, will come, and will stay as they explore spiritual issues. If these marks are not there, then small groups will consist only of believers or traditional, "Christianized" people.

# V. FIVE MINISTRY FRONTS FOR GLOBAL CITIES

Ideally, urban center churches should strive for equal emphasis along the following five ministry fronts:

+ Welcoming, attracting, and engaging non-Christian people
+ Transforming character through deep community and small groups
+ Holistically serving the city, especially the poor, in word and deed
+ Producing cultural leaders who integrate faith and work in society
+ Routinely multiplying itself into new churches with the same vision

Many churches major on one or two of these elements, but the breadth, balance, and blend of these commitments are rare in a church. Nevertheless, this balance is crucial for ministry in city centers.

## ENGAGING SECULAR PEOPLE

As mentioned above, the gospel removes any sense of superiority toward those who do not share our beliefs. We respect and remember what it is like to seriously doubt Christianity. We expect nonbelievers to be present in almost every facet of our church's ministry, and we make every effort to engage and address their questions and concerns. One of the main ways we do this is with the missional mindset that makes worship and small groups a place where Christians and non-Christians grow together.

The church's communication and preaching must continually chip away at the main "defeaters," the widely held objections to Christianity that keep most people from solid faith. The following are the main arguments against Christianity in U.S. cities today:[12]

+ *The Other Religions.* "No one should insist their view of God is better than all the rest. All religions are equally valid."
+ *Evil and Suffering.* "A good, all-powerful God wouldn't allow this evil and suffering. Therefore, this God doesn't exist or can't be trusted."
+ *The Ethical Straitjacket.* "We must be free to choose for ourselves how to live—no one can impose it on us. This is the only truly authentic life."
+ *The Record of Christians.* "If Christianity is the true religion, why would so much oppression happen in history with the support of the church?"

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12 See Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008) for an in-depth discussion of these modern-day objections.

+ *The Angry God.* "Christianity is built around a condemning, judgmental deity who demands blood sacrifices even to forgive."
+ *The Issue of Science.* "As a believer in evolution, I cannot accept the Bible's prescientific accounts of the origin of life."
+ *The Unreliable Bible*. "The Bible can't be trusted historically or scientifically, and much of its teaching is socially regressive."

Today a city-center church must use presuppositional reasoning more than the old evidential approach. It has to show that all doubts and objections to Christianity are themselves alternate beliefs and faith-acts. For instance, if a person says, "I just can't believe there is only one true religion," that is a faith-act; it cannot be proven. When non-Christians see their doubts are actually beliefs and their convictions require the same amount of evidence they are asking of Christian beliefs, it becomes evident to them that many of their doubts are really very weak and have been adopted largely because of cultural pressure. The urban-center church redundantly weaves responses to these arguments into every area, so people will have their barriers to faith removed.

It helps for people to realize that they already believe in God at a deep level, whatever they may tell themselves intellectually. Our outrage against injustice, despite how natural it is in a world based on natural selection, shows that we already do believe in God at the most basic level but are suppressing that knowledge for our convenience. The Christian view of God means the world is not the product of violence or random disorder but was created by a triune God to be a place of peace and community. So at the root of all reality is not power and individual self-assertion but love and sacrificial service for the common good.

Additionally, our postmodern listeners must recognize they are not truly free. No one is. Everyone is spiritually enthralled by something. Sin is not simply breaking rules but is building our identity on things other than God, which leads internally to emptiness, craving, and spiritual slavery, and externally to exclusion, conflict, and social injustice.

Our preaching must focus on the death and resurrection of Jesus. All forgiveness entails suffering, and the only way for God to forgive us and restore justice in the world without destroying us was to come into history and give himself to suffer and die on the cross in the person of Jesus Christ. Both the results of the cross (freedom from shame and guilt, and awareness of our significance and value) and the pattern of the cross (power through service, wealth through giving, and joy through suffering) radically change the way we relate to God, ourselves, and the world. If Jesus was raised from the dead as a forerunner of the renewal of all the material and physical world, this gives Christians both an incentive to work to restore creation (fighting poverty, hunger, and injustice) and infinite hope that our labors will not be in vain. Finally, it eliminates the fear of death.

A church that continually chips away at defeaters and continually lays down the basic building blocks of faith in all its services and meetings will actually be training Christians in how to do evangelism within their culture. Much evangelism will happen naturally. Christians will talk more wisely to non-Christian friends and will have the confidence to bring them to church meetings, because they trust the attractiveness and intelligibility of what will occur there. Some non-Christians will always be getting converted in the ordinary meetings of the church, and they in turn will bring others. Ultimately this is the most powerful dynamic for evangelism. Evangelistic programs will not help if the church itself is not permeated with this missional mindset. This missional emphasis does not preclude evangelistic programs at all. If the church's basic ministry and mindset are missional, then focused evangelistic outreaches and programs will be highly effective.

## ESTABLISHING COUNTERCULTURAL CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

God's purpose in history is not simply to save individual souls but to create a new humanity, a people with a communal life that reflects in some degree the future kingdom of God. In Christendom, "fellowship" was basically just a set of nurturing relationships, support, and accountability. These are necessary, of course, but when surrounded by a very non-Christian culture, Christian community takes on additional importance. We must embody a counterculture that shows the world how radically different a Christian society is with regard to sex, money, and power.

+ *Sex.* We avoid the two extremes: secular society's idolization of sex and traditional society's fear of sex. We also exhibit love rather than hostility or fear toward those whose sexual life patterns are different from ours.
+ *Money*. We promote and demonstrate a radically generous commitment of time, money, relationships, and living space for social justice and the needs of the poor and weak among us. We also must exhibit radical economic sharing with one another so that there are no needy persons among us (Acts 4:34).
+ *Power*. We are committed to power sharing and relationship building between races and classes that are currently alienated outside of the body of Christ. The practical evidence of this is that we become a multiethnic body, one that accurately represents our neighborhood.

We must practice Christian unity as much as possible at the city level. In Christendom, when it seemed like "everyone was a Christian," it was perhaps necessary for a church to define itself over against other churches. Today, however, it is much more illuminating and helpful for churches to focus on the "majors" of the gospel even when we disagree on other matters.[13] It is important that we not spend our time criticizing other kinds of churches. That simply plays into the common defeater belief that Christians are intolerant. While we need to align ourselves in denominations that share many of our distinctives, at the local level we should reach out to and support the other churches in our local area. This will raise many thorny issues, of course, but our bias should be in the direction of cooperation.

Because of the lack of extended families and social support systems in city centers, small groups are crucial to city-center churches. Building community, however, is the most challenging of the five ministry fronts, largely because of the mobility of the population, the high cost of living, and the long hours of career commitment. Ideas for promoting community include finding ways to assimilate short-term residents into small groups quickly, encouraging Christians to put down roots and raise their families in the city (Jer. 29), and working for community-friendly infrastructure (schools, credit unions, housing) in the city. Additionally, it is important to uphold a positive view of the city. We are neither to condemn it nor to merely celebrate it, but to love it and see it as the most strategic place for Christians to live and serve.[14]

## ENGAGING IN HOLISTIC MINISTRY FOR THE ENTIRE CITY

God called the exiled Israelites to live in and seek the peace and prosperity of their pagan city of Babylon (Jer. 29:4–7). Likewise, Jesus called Christians to be a city of God within the earthly city (Matt. 5:14–16), showing the glory of God through deeds of service. The citizens of God's city are to be the very best citizens of their earthly city, working not just for their own prosperity but for the common good of their neighbors and the whole metropolis.

Jesus did not save us just with words, but also through his deeds, his work. The gospel demands that every recipient of God's grace surrender the illusion of self-sufficiency. All this equips us to use our gifts and resources to love our neighbors not only in word, but also through deeds of sacrificial love. The

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13. For example, Paul urges two women in the Philippian church to "agree with one another in the Lord" (Phil 4:2.) That is, not "decide which of you is right" but "remember, despite your disagreement in the minors that you agree in the majors—the gospel of the Lord."

14. See below, and Al Barth, "A Vision for Our Cities," gospelinlife.com (2009).

gospel*in*life.com

gospel removes all superiority toward the poor. It empowers us to meet individual needs in the city and also to work for justice for the powerless.

Secular people have a strong belief that religion is really just about social power. They tend to place every church somewhere on the ideological spectrum from left wing liberal to right wing conservative. But the gospel makes the church impossible to categorize: it defies the values of the world—power, status, recognition, and wealth. The gospel is triumph through weakness, wealth through poverty, and power through service. This changes our attitudes toward the poor as well as our attitudes about our own status, wealth, and careers. In sum, we do not primarily emphasize evangelism (as conservative churches do) or social justice (as liberal churches do), but we give strong emphasis to both.

A gospel-centered church should combine zeals that are ordinarily never seen together in the same church. This is one of the main ways we cause people to look twice and take our message seriously. In general, holistic ministry should demonstrate zeal along three dimensions.

+ First, within the church community itself there should be radical sharing of economic resources. We should care for one another's practical needs—economic, social, physical, medical, emotional—with the utmost generosity and care.

+ Second, within the immediate neighborhood the church should show its sacrificial love by meeting the practical needs of people, whether they believe as we do or not.

+ Third, throughout the whole city the church should seek to serve and lift up the poor.

## EQUIPPING PEOPLE FOR CULTURAL RENEWAL THROUGH INTEGRATION OF FAITH AND WORK

The gospel brings a unique perspective on God, human nature, the material world, the direction of history, and the importance of community. These perspectives inevitably influence the way we work, whether in the arts, business, government, the media, or the academy. Therefore, we equip Christians to integrate their faith with their work in three ways.

### The Theorists

First, the laity needs theological education about how to "think Christianly" about all of life, public and private, and about how to work with Christian distinctiveness. Christians need to know which cultural practices are gifts of common grace to be embraced, which practices are antithetical to the gospel and must be rejected, and which practices can be adapted or revised. Scholars and very successful practitioners in each field theorize about what it means to be a Christian within that vocation, including social work, community development, politics, law, government, finance, business, counseling, medicine, education, scholarship, arts, dance, literature, theater, film, journalism, media, and publishing.

### The Educators/Mentors

Second, they need to be practically mentored, placed, and positioned in their vocations in the most advantageous way. They need cooperation in their fields with others who can encourage, advise, and advocate for them. Educators and practitioners in each area create materials, networks, and venues for the support and training of workers in each of these areas.

### The Church Community

Finally, they need spiritual support for the ups and downs of their work, as well as accountability for living and working with Christian integrity. Christians are recruited off campuses to move into major cultural centers, where they are trained, positioned, and mentored, all in the context of church communities that celebrate and support them as doing real "kingdom work" and ministry in the world.

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## PLANTING NEW CHURCHES

Vigorous, continual planting of new congregations is the single most crucial strategy for the numerical growth of the body of Christ, the renewal of existing churches, and the overall impact of the church on the culture of any city. Nothing else—not crusades, outreach programs, para-church ministries, mega-churches, consulting, or church renewal processes—will have the consistent impact of dynamic and extensive church planting. This is an eyebrow-raising statement, but studies show that the subject is hardly controversial.

New churches are the single best way to revitalize older congregations in the area. New churches help the overall body of Christ by showcasing new ministry forms and ideas that would never have been adopted in older churches, creating an "it can be done" mindset in older churches, providing the city with many new converts (some of whom find their way to older churches), and supporting many new ministries that have city-wide benefits.

New churches are by far the best way to reach new generations, new residents, and new people groups. The average new church gains most of its new members from the ranks of people who are not attending any worshipping body, while churches more than ten to fifteen years old gain eighty to ninety percent of new members by transfer from other congregations. Moreover, new churches are the only ministries that become self-supporting and expand the base for all other ministries.

The church planting mindset means city-center churches will think of church planting as just one of the many things they do along with the rest (i.e., "We do teaching, evangelism, discipling, worship, Christian education, and church planting.") Church planting should not be like a building campaign—one big traumatic hiccup followed by an even bigger sigh of relief. Rather, having a church-planting mindset is to operate like Paul, who was always engaged in evangelism, discipleship, and church planting.

Urban-center churches are in the very best possible place to plant churches. They have a mobile population, in that new converts are constantly moving to other parts of the city or the suburbs or other cities; churches can be planted by following them and using them as core members. The greatest difficulty with church planting in urban centers is maintaining the theological elements while making concessions for the unique demographic and ethnic elements of the new church-planting area. Only then will church planting create a movement of churches related well enough to one another to conduct ministries together.


# VI. "THEOLOGICAL DNA" OF URBAN CENTER CHURCHES

Finally, in order to reach the great global cities of the world, we hope to have many churches reaching different cities and parts of cities, but sharing a common vision of what the gospel can accomplish in a heart, a community, and a city. The following are some of the fundamentals of this "DNA," which would form both a common strand and a basis for self-replication:[15]

## GRASPING THE DEPTH OF THE GOSPEL

The gospel is the dynamic for all heart change, life change, and social change. Change will not happen through "trying harder," but through a deep encounter with the radical grace of God.

### The Holiness-Love Axis: The Gospel of Grace

If we think of God as all, or mainly, holy and think of ourselves as saved because we are living moral lives according to his standards, then we are not moved to the depths when we think of our salvation.

15. See Timothy Keller, *Center Church*,(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012) for a complete statement of these principles.

We earned it; thus, there is no joy or amazement or tears. We are not galvanized and transformed from the inside. On the other hand, if we think of God as all, or mainly love and think of ourselves as saved because God just forgives and accepts everyone no matter how we live, then we are not moved to the depths when we think of our salvation. There is no joy or amazement or tears, because God forgives—that's his job. Again, we are not galvanized and transformed from the inside.

### The Truth-Experience Axis: The Gift of the Spirit

When a church stresses the cognitive to the exclusion of the experiential, or the experiential to the exclusion of the cognitive, there will be a lack of transformed lives. Each must be stressed equally and must not be pitted against each other but seen as complementary. It is truth that we experience—yet our experience is what makes us hungry for more truth. Some people have sound doctrine but are threatened by the emphasis on experience and activity. Others are concerned about real life and society but have rejected the idea of an authoritative Bible and the orthodox faith. Legalism is truth without grace, which is not real truth; relativism is grace without truth, which is not real grace. To the degree that a ministry fails to do justice to both, it loses its life-changing power.

### The Individual-Corporate Axis: The Gospel of the Kingdom

Some conservative Christians think of the story of salvation as the fall, redemption, heaven. In this narrative, the purpose of redemption is escape from this world; only saved people have anything of value, while unbelieving people in the world are seen as blind and bad. If, however, the story of salvation is creation, fall, redemption, and restoration, then things look different. In this narrative, non-Christians are seen as created in the image of God and given much wisdom and greatness within them (cf. Ps. 8), even though the image is defaced and fallen. Moreover, the purpose of redemption is not to escape the world but to renew it. The gospel then is not just about individual happiness and fulfillment. It is not just a "wonderful plan for my life," but a wonderful plan for the world. It is about the coming of God's kingdom to renew all things. The gospel creates a people with an alternate way of being human. Racial and class superiority, accrual of money and power at the expense of others, yearning for popularity and recognition—all these things are marks of living in the old order, and they are the opposite of the mindset of the kingdom (Luke 6:20–26). In summary, if we lose the emphasis on conversion, we lose the power of the gospel for personal transformation. We will not work sacrificially and joyfully for justice. On the other hand, if we lose the emphasis on the corporate—on the kingdom—we lose the power of the gospel for cultural transformation.

## UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF CITIES

God told Adam and Eve to build a culture ("have dominion," Gen. 1:28 KJV) that honored him. They failed; but when Jesus, the second Adam (cf. Rom. 5:12-6:14), completes his work the result will be a city (Rev. 21–22). Cities continue to be the main place where culture develops. As the city goes, so goes the entire culture of the arts, scholarship, communication, philosophy, and commerce. People who do not live in cities are marginal to the culture-forging centers.

The ministry of the early Christians was remarkably city-centric. Paul's missionary journeys were not focused on the countryside. When he entered a new region, he planted churches in the biggest city of that region and then left.

### Personal Aspect

In the village, people tend to live in stable environments. Thus they are suspicious of any major change. Because of the diversity and intensity of the cities, urbanites are much more open to radically new ideas—like the gospel!

### Cultural Aspect

In the village, one or two lawyers may be reached for Christ. But reaching the legal profession as a whole is attained by going to the city where the law schools are located, the law journals are published, and the top law firms are located.

### Global Aspect

In the village, you can win only the single people group that is there. If you want to spread the gospel to ten or twenty new national groups at once, you would go to the city, where they can all be reached through the one *lingua franca* of the place.

The theology of the city is clearly illustrated in Jeremiah's urban-centric prophetic mandate and in Paul's urban-centric missionary strategy. "Seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you" (Jer. 29:7). Paul planted churches in the largest urban center of each region, because cities were (and are) the culture-forming wombs of society. Whatever captures the cultural centers captures society. By 300 AD, fifty percent of the urban population of the Roman Empire was Christian, while more than ninety percent of the countryside was still pagan. In the same way, the best way for Christians to win and serve our society is to live in great numbers in cities—not despising them, accommodating to them, seeking control of them, or using them for career opportunities—but rather loving them and seeking their peace.[16]

Now is a historic moment for global cities. Cities in Western society are being flooded with people from the parts of the world where Christianity is growing in credibility, i.e., Africa, Latin America, and Asia. The grass-roots population of Western cities could become Christian to a greater extent than has been seen in one hundred years. Over the next couple of generations those Christians will move into urban centers, into the culture-forming institutions, and exert influence. In addition, the younger, more multiethnic generations in the United States show much more interest in spirituality in general and Christianity in particular. To take advantage of this historic moment, two kinds of churches are needed. First, hundreds of grassroots Christian leaders coming into the urban centers must be supported to plant thousands of new churches among the new residents. Second, as resource churches, we must produce hundreds of urban-center churches that will help all the new professionals coming in from outside the city to learn how to operate as Christians in a secular, pluralistic culture. If we can realize our vision of a great movement of gospel-centered churches in a city as influential as New York City, we may literally see our world change.

## SEEKING THE BALANCE OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Contextualization is the incarnation of the gospel in a new culture. As we saw earlier, each culture has at its heart a unique worldview or narrative. To reach a culture, the gospel must enter, challenge, and retell the stories of that culture. In so doing, two equal and opposite errors can emerge. First, if the culture is not truly entered (that is, if the gospel communication comes in the undiluted cultural form of its sender), then people will experience only a cultural conversion. They will not actually encounter God but simply adopt the culture of the sender. Second, if the culture is not truly challenged and reworked (that is, if the basic idols of the culture are not really removed), then people will similarly experience only a cultural conversion; they will simply get a lightly Christianized version of their own culture.

Every expression and embodiment of Christianity is contextualized. There is no such thing as a universal, ahistorical expression of Christianity. Jesus did not come to earth as a generalized human being. In becoming human, he had to become a *particular* human and came to a particular people. He was male, Jewish, and working class; he was a socially and culturally situated person. This means that we must "incarnate" even as Jesus did. Actual Christian practices must have both a biblical form and a cultural form. For example, the

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16. See James Boice's *Two Cities, Two Loves* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

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Bible clearly directs us to use music to praise God, but as soon as we choose a specific music to use, we enter a culture. As soon as we choose a language, a vocabulary, a particular level of emotional expressiveness, or a sermon illustration, we move toward the social context of some people and away from the social context of others. Adaptation to culture is inevitable.

Note, however, that contextualization is not relativism. As D. A. Carson has said, "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."[17]  It is important to keep the balance of this statement. If you forget the first half, you will think there is only one true way to *communicate* the gospel. If you forget the second half, you'll lose your grip on the fact that, nonetheless, there *is* only one true gospel. Either way, you will be ineffective in ministry. While we see that Paul did not change the gospel, he did adapt it. This may open the door to some abuses, but fear and the refusal to adapt culturally will open the door to abuses of the gospel just as much. The balance is to realize that contextualization is unavoidable while also realizing that relativism can be—and should be—avoided.

If we over-adapt to a culture we are trying to reach, it means we have bought into that culture's idols. We are allowing that culture too much authority. For example, we may take a good theme, such as Western culture's freedom of the individual, and allow it to be an idol (e.g., the dominance of the individual over pastoral accountability and discipline). If, on the other hand we under-adapt to a culture, it means we have accepted our own culture's idols. We are forgetting that our own version of Christianity is in large part not biblical but simply cultural. To the degree a ministry is over- or under-adapted, it loses culture-transforming power.

It is also important to remember that urban centers are dense and diverse and home to new residents, new immigrants, and young professionals who move to the city to make their own way. They are often culturally unlike the long-time residents (the corporate and cultural leaders). It is easy to fail to contextualize the gospel and church ministries to these newcomers and  to simply offer up a suburban model of ministry (not tapping into the city's cultural narratives, not speaking in the city's voice) and still draw a crowd from this group of new residents. The church, however, must continually ask itself whether it is really reaching the longer-time residents or simply gathering the outsiders and the short-term newcomers.

## UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL FORMATION

**Top-Down Perspective.** One perspective is that trends in culture always flow downward from the most influential elite culturalinstitutions, such as Ivy League institutions, Hollywood, or dominant media conglomerates. Therefore, it is important for Christians to have a presence in top-level institutions or venues, to write and produce plays and films, to contribute to the op-ed pages of *The New York Times,* to lead the administrations of Ivy League schools, or manage elite publications and research organizations.

**Bottom-up Aspect.** However, cultural change also occurs when a new culture is theorized and imagined by academics, thinkers, and artists, and when countercultural communities (e.g., churches) of significant numbers, size, and impact in all fields—not just politics—adopt this new vision, live for the common good, and work for strategic change in cultural centers (major cities or the university nexus). Compare the impact of evangelicals who do not live in cultural centers, ethnic groups who do live in cultural centers but fail to work for the common good, and groups who do both.

17. Donald A. Carson, "Maintaining Scientific and Christian Truths in a Postmodern World," in *Science & Christian Belief* Vol. 14, No. 2 (October 2002), 107–122.

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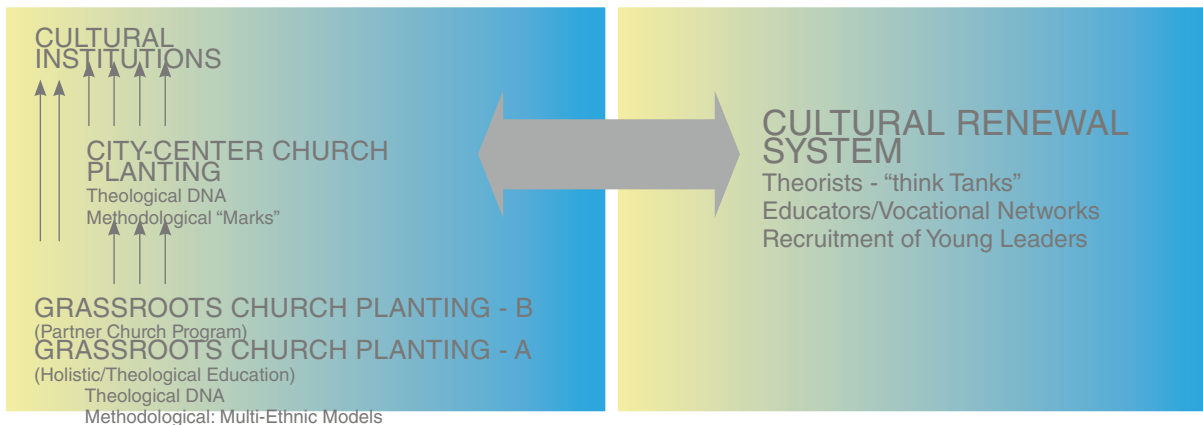## IMPLEMENTING ALL MINISTRY FRONTS

Earlier we outlined the five ministry fronts: engagement with secular people, development of Christian community, service to the city and the poor, integration of faith and work, and commitment to church planting. All five ministry elements are required, in order to emulate the One who is full of grace and truth. The grace orientation of the gospel makes evangelistic worship and deep community both possible and necessary. The kingdom, or truth, orientation of the gospel makes holistic ministry and the integration of faith and work imperative. Both grace and truth provide the motivation for the hard work of church planting.

In addition, we engage in all five because they are interdependent on each other. Holistic ministry, in which Christians work sacrificially for the common good, is the necessary context for any convincing evangelistic call to believe in Jesus. (Why should the people of the city listen to us if we are simply out to increase our own tribe and its power?) Moreover, culture cannot be changed simply through numerous conversions if Christians continue to seal off their gospel beliefs from the way they work and live in public. Finally, church planting is ultimately the only way to increase all these other ministries in the city. Only if we conduct all of these ministries simultaneously will any of them be effective.

Having said this, we must recognize the impossibility of any one church being equally successful at them all. There will be different models of churches, even among those that share the same "theological DNA." Why is this? First, there is no promise that God will give any one church an equal distribution of gifts; some churches simply attract more people with a concern for the poor than for the arts, and so on. Second, churches will be located in different places in the city; some will be on the edge of a poor area, others near a center of one particular immigrant group, another in the middle of the artistic community. Thus, the immediate context of the church will make it stronger in some of these areas than others.

Third, lead pastors will rarely display an equal giftedness in leading the church in each of these five areas. Large churches can staff themselves to counterbalance the lead pastor's weak areas, but that is not true of smaller churches. So while every church will be better at two or three of these emphases, they must relentlessly work to keep strengthening their weaker ministry aspects. While many churches major exclusively in seeker-oriented evangelism or in holistic mercy ministry or in cultural engagement or in cell group ministry or in church planting, an urban-center church must possess in equal measure all five of these emphases, built on the foundation of a depth-proclamation of the gospel.

### A MODEL OF CITY CHANGE



CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

CITY-CENTER CHURCH PLANTING
Theological DNA
Methodological "Marks"

CULTURAL RENEWAL SYSTEM
Theorists - "think Tanks"
Educators/Vocational Networks
Recruitment of Young Leaders

GRASSROOTS CHURCH PLANTING - B
(Partner Church Program)
GRASSROOTS CHURCH PLANTING - A
(Holistic/Theological Education)
Theological DNA
Methodological: Multi-Ethnic Models

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If, and only if, we produce thousands of new church communities that regularly attract and engage secular people, seek the common good of the whole city and especially the poor, and produce thousands of Christians who integrate their faith into their work—writing plays, making movies, contributing articles, producing new business ventures, engaging in leading-edge scholarship and literature—will we see our vision for the city realized and our whole society changed as a result.