chapter 13

THE CALL TO THE CITY

Paul and other Christian missionaries went to great cities because when Christianity was planted there, it spread regionally (cities were the centers of transportation routes); it also spread globally (cities were multiethnic, international centers, and converts took the gospel back to their homeland); and finally it more readily affected the culture (the centers of learning, law, and government were in the cities). As we will see in this chapter, the importance of cities for Christian mission today is, if anything, even greater.

Today, cities are more important than ever before. In 1950, New York and London were the only world cities with metro-area populations of over ten million people. Today, however, there are more than twenty such cities — twelve of which achieved that ranking in the last two decades — with many more to come.[1] All of these new megacities are developing in what was once called the Third World. But why?

In the eighteenth century, a combination of population growth and technology brought rural Europe to its "carrying capacity," creating a surplus population. Virtually all of the land was owned and developed, and so every family had some members who left the family farm, the countryside, and the small towns to make a living elsewhere. As a result, the great cities of Europe (and, in the nineteenth century, America) swelled in size. Many experts now believe that this type of shift has begun to occur in Africa, in Asia, and to a lesser extent in Latin America, where cities are exploding with people from the rural areas. If the urban-to-rural ratio of these populations stabilizes near 75 percent to 25 percent, as it did in Europe and North America, the next three decades will see over half a billion people move into the cities of Africa and Asia alone — in other words, one new Rio de Janeiro (ten million people) *every two months*.[2] Currently, Western cities such as New York City grow at approximately 125,000 people per year, but cities such as Dhaka and Lagos are growing at a rate of more than half a million per year. By most estimates, we have reached the point where over 50 percent of the world population now lives in cities, compared to around 5 percent two centuries ago.[3]

GLOBALIZATION AND RENAISSANCE

The significance of cities today lies not only in their growing size but also in their growing influence, and this influence is due to the rise of globalization. The technological revolution has led to an unprecedented mobility of people, ideas, and capital. Because of the Internet and other forms of electronic communication, people around the world are more connected than ever before, and Western urban values in particular are spreading everywhere.

What is the effect of this "flattening" of the world due to globalization?[4] First, globalization *connects cities to the world*. Some people predicted that the rise of technology would end up weakening cities, that it would make agglomeration (a cluster of usually disparate elements) obsolete.[5] Social networking and communication online, it was argued, would make it unnecessary to pay the high costs of living in the city. But as Edwin Heathcote has written, "Digital networking has not, as was forecast, led to a decline in the city. Rather, it has led to an urbanization of the rest of the planet."[6] People, especially young people, want to live in cities. The rise of new forms of technology and mobility has not weakened this desire. Instead, it has dramatically expanded the reach and influence of urban culture. This urbanizing influence now extends far beyond the city limits, affecting even the most rural areas of remote countries. Children in Mexico and Romania are becoming more like young adults in Los Angeles and New York City than the adults in their own locales.

Second, globalization *connects cities to cities*. Not only does globalization connect the rest of the world to urban ideas and culture; it also connects cities to one another, enhancing their power and influence.[7] World cities are more connected to others around the world than they are to their own nations. The elites of New York, London, and Tokyo not only work for the same multinational companies, but they also graduate from common educational institutions, take vacations and buy homes in the same places, and share common social and cultural values. They are better able to identify with the urban elites of other nations than with the nonurban citizens of their own countries.

The strong connections among major cities exist not only through the elites, however. Huge, diverse immigrant populations in global cities tie each urban area tightly to scores of other countries. They travel frequently and communicate daily with their homelands. This means, for example, that thousands of residents of New York City are in much closer communication with people in Athens, Manila, Port-au-Prince, Bogota, Hong Kong, and Lagos than they are with the residents of New Jersey and Connecticut. Each global city is a portal to others.

> "Digital networking has not led to a decline in the city. Rather, it has led to an urbanization of the rest of the planet."
> — Edwin Heathcote

These networked world cities are quickly becoming more economically and culturally powerful than their own national governments. Governments are increasingly losing control of the flow of capital and information and have far less influence than the multinational corporations and international financial, social, and technological networks based in global cities. According to the American journalist Neal Peirce, "Great metropolitan regions — not cities, not states, not even the nation states — are starting to emerge as the world's most influential players."[8]

Cities not only grow and mature, but they can also be reborn. Despite the pessimism about Western cities during the late twentieth century, many have regenerated during the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. During the twenty years from 1970 to 1990, many American cities went into sharp decline. Immigration of blacks from the South to northern cities resulted in white flight, and many poor people were trapped in inner-city ghettos. In the late 1970s and early 1980s protracted recessions diminished tax revenues and drove some cities near or into actual bankruptcy. Meanwhile, urban planning in the mid-twentieth century privileged the suburbs. Whole urban neighborhoods were bulldozed to create expressways that gave suburban residents easy access to center-city jobs. Planners also favored big stores and stadiums with lots of parking, as well as massive housing projects for the poor. All of this led to downtown urban centers that were like ghost towns after dark. The middle class flight to the suburbs took many jobs, leaving the poor poorer and most neighborhoods riddled with crime. Cities hollowed out into "doughnuts," with poor nonwhite centers and affluent white suburbs.

However, since 1990, American cities have experienced an amazing renaissance.[9] During this time, many cities' population declines have begun to reverse. People began to move back into cities, and center cities began to regenerate at their cores. Why? One of the primary reasons is that during this time the U.S. economy experienced a sustained period of growth, which created a great deal of new wealth and new jobs in knowledge sectors. Second, crime went down in cities for the reasons liberals cite (more jobs) and for the reasons conservatives cite (tougher enforcement). Third, a cultural mood developed (which some call postmodern) embracing eclecticism, the mixture of the old and new, asymmetry, messiness and unmanageability, cultural diversity, and the artistic and organic. All of

COMEBACK: MINNEAPOLIS AND MILAN

Edward Glaeser cites Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Milan, Italy, as cities that have reinvented themselves. Between 1950 and 1980, Minneapolis lost 30 percent of its population, and its location and climate hardly made it a great candidate for urban renaissance. Its older way of attracting human capital—touting its riverside location—was no longer of much appeal. Yet since 1980, the population of Minneapolis has continued to grow, and it now has the highest per capita income in the upper Midwest. Why? Minneapolis has reinvented itself as a *center of education.* It is home to the University of Minnesota, and "the city's most striking economic success stories have some link to that school."[10] One example is Medtronic, the world's largest medical technology company.

Milan was a manufacturing giant that was hit by the same forces that led to the decline in the American Rust Belt. Its population fell almost 30 percent from 1970 through 2000. However, Milan reinvented itself, and today three-quarters of its workers are in services, especially finance, but also health and biotechnologies, telecommunications, and, of course, retail and fashion. The population has continued to grow over the past decade.[11]

these are features of city life rather than of suburban culture. Younger adults began to prefer city life and started moving to urban areas in greater numbers. Fourth, changes in immigration law opened the door to an influx of immigrants from non-European nations. Between 1965 and 1970, U.S. immigration doubled. Then, from 1970 to 1990 it doubled again. Most of this immigration wave emptied into America's cities, renewing and diversifying many neighborhoods. It also completely changed the older, gridlocked, binary black-white dynamic of urban politics into a far more complex, multipolar situation, with many ethnicities and nationalities.

As a result, many American cities began to surge. Professionals streamed into center-city neighborhoods, while new ethnic communities developed within older working-class and poor neighborhoods. Sometimes the gentrification process was more destructive and disruptive to the social fabric; in other cases it had a more wholesome effect. The major actors in this renewed upsurge included empty-nester boomers returning to cities, young professionals seeking cities to live and work in, and a wave of immigrants in inner-city neighborhoods and inner suburbs that eventually produced second-generation college graduates who moved into the center city to live and work. These groups joined the gays and artists who have always chosen to live in urban communities.[12]

Edward Glaeser points out that not all cities have succeeded in the past generation — and he points to Detroit, Michigan, and Leipzig, Germany, as examples. But most cities have found the power to reinvent themselves, argues Glaeser, because the essence of what makes a city a city is the bringing of people together to innovate. At one level, this means bringing together the most highly trained and talented people, the "elites." Yet at another level, it means bringing together the most energetic, ambitious, and risk-taking people from among the poor and middle classes of the world. Cities are cauldrons of reengineering and reinvention, and so it should not surprise us to find that they are always reinventing themselves.

Perhaps the most interesting example of contemporary urban reinvention is what has been called the "consumer city." The post – World War II years brought about the rise of suburbanization and the creation of the commuter city. People chose suburban life for its amenities and comforts and commuted into the city only for work and the occasional show. But Vancouver and Los Angeles are two urban areas that reversed the trend. They became *consumer* cities marked by a new phenomenon — the reverse commuter. Increasingly, these and other cities offer residents a quality of life they could not find elsewhere in the region — a dizzying variety of artistic, educational, cultural, and entertainment events and venues, but also (now) safe streets, good schools, and excellent public transportation. Many people now move to London, New York, and Paris and are willing to pay a premium to live in the center of the city, even if their jobs take them out of the core of the city each day.[13]

THE FUTURE OF CITIES

Few people now believe we will see a significant decline in the population growth and importance of global cities, at least in the foreseeable future. The growth trends and culture shifts are on too strong a trajectory. However, the Great Recession and hard economic times in the United States and Europe mean that city governments in these countries are being forced to make deep, painful cuts to their budgets, while the private sector faces the prospect of years of high unemployment. The gaps in social service offerings are likely to widen in many cities. These changes will certainly have an impact on the quality of life in cities.[14]

So will Western cities return to the economic and population decline they experienced in the 1970s and 1980s? Several trends are likely to help many cities in the West continue flourishing, at least for the foreseeable future. First, the world will continue to globalize — and globalization is a boon to cities that connect to it. More cities will imitate the biggest and most established cities in the West — New York, Los Angeles, and London — whose strong international connections and influences will help to keep real estate values up and provide a constant source of jobs (regardless of how national economies are faring). As a result, most globalizing cities should be able to remain economically stable.

Second, current urban planning in Western cities has returned to the classic urban form — compact, public transit – oriented, and walkable, mixed-use development (with residences, businesses, retail outlets, educational and cultural institutions, and entertainment venues situated together). The emphasis will be on developing neighborhood schools, "complete" streets with sidewalks for pedestrians, and lanes for bicyclists. This renewed emphasis on older forms is sometimes called "New Urbanism" or "Smart Growth," and there are many factors driving this trend. One relates to environmental concerns. Suburban and rural dwellers consume far more energy — electricity, fossil fuels, and other forms — than urban residents.[15] The increasingly urgent search for energy sustainability will continue to press societies to urbanize. Cities, therefore, will remain a very attractive alternative to the suburbs as a social arrangement.

Third, immigration laws have not significantly changed (as of this writing), and so it is likely that the United States will continue to receive immigrants from around the world. Though some trends have seen immigrants moving straight into the suburbs, the structure of city life continues to provide most new immigrants with the essential support resources they need to successfully transition into a new society. Cities today will compete for immigrants, knowing that the urban areas that receive the most immigration will be best positioned for future success.

THERE REALLY IS NO CHOICE

Al Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, read the 2010 Special Report by *Financial Times* titled "The Future of Cities" and responded with strong language:

> This much is clear—the cities are where the people are. In the course of less than 300 years, our world will have shifted from one in which only 3 percent of people live in cities, to one in which 80 percent are resident in urban areas.
>
> If the Christian church does not learn new modes of urban ministry, we will find ourselves on the outside looking in. The Gospel of Jesus Christ must call a new generation of committed Christians into these teeming cities. As these new numbers make clear, there really is no choice.[16]

Fourth, one of the greatest fears about cities — that high, life-threatening crime is inevitable in very large urban areas — is fast eroding. Led by New York City, many cities in North America have seen startling drops in crime over the past two decades; and this is one of the main drivers of economic and population growth in cities. The decline in crime is often attributed entirely to better police practices, as Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York recently

All current signs lead us to believe that the world order of the twenty-first century will be global, multicultural, and urban.

claimed.[17] But criminologists have shown that policing can only account for part of the decline, and that crime only falls off drastically when a variety of factors converge, many of which are impossible to measure directly.[18] These may include the strengthening of "civil society" — in the flourishing of voluntary associations such as stronger parent-teacher alliances, growth in religious institutions, growth in various nonprofit agencies, and greater public-private cooperatives.[19]

Fifth, as far as I can tell, the postmodern mood that leads many young adults to prefer city life to suburban life will continue. This trend is difficult to quantify or fully explain, but the appeal of city life for young people remains quite strong, and the presence of youthful energy and creativity will continue to sustain the growth and strength of cities. According to the *Wall Street Journal* and *The Atlantic*, approximately 32 percent of Americans in the Millennial generation live in cities — and 88 percent of them want to.[20]

Some of the most troubled cities, such as Detroit, will need to make drastic changes, shrinking their urban footprint and redesigning into smaller municipalities. But this is unlikely to become the norm in the United States. I believe globalization and the current cultural mood will continue to make cities highly desirable destinations for ambitious and innovative people, and this will be a decisive factor in continuing the growth and dominance of urban culture.

Now, more than ever, cities set the course of society and life as a whole, even in areas of the world, such as Europe and North America, where cities are not growing as rapidly.[21] All current signs lead us to believe that the world order of the twenty-first century will be global, multicultural, and urban.

THE CHALLENGE OF MINISTRY IN CITIES

The massive growth and influence of cities in our time confront Christian mission with an enormous challenge. The first problem is one of sheer scale and economics. It is critical that we have Christians and churches wherever there are people, but the people of the world are now moving into the great cities of the world many times faster than the church is. Christian communication and ministry must always be translated into every new language and context, but the Christian church is not responding fast enough to keep up with the rapid population growth in cities.

There are five million new people moving into the cities of the developing world every month — roughly the size of the metropolitan areas of Philadelphia or San Francisco. Think of that — how many churches ought there to be in a city the size of Philadelphia? Even if there were one church for every five thousand people — which is five times fewer than the United States average[22] — this means we should be planting a thousand urban churches in the world every month.

But the challenge is not just numerical; it is also conceptual and methodological. Our very models for ministry must become increasingly urbanized. U.S. missions agencies are finding that more and more they must send their workers to live and minister in the growing cities. But seldom are these Americans experienced at life or ministry in the city. A couple of years ago, I met with American missionaries who had been sent to one of the fast-growing megacities of China. They told me their mission agency had assumed that the training they needed had to do with learning the language and understanding Chinese culture. But after a while they realized they knew nothing about living in cities. Each member of their team had grown up in small towns in southern and midwestern areas of the United States. They struggled more with urban life than with life in China per se. And they also came to see that the people they were trying to reach were more like people living in Los Angeles and Manhattan than like those in the Chinese countryside. The leader of the team told me, "Only the language training we received was helpful. We were given no training in how to live in cities and how to reach urban people, and as a result we've been ineffective."

Urbanization is not only transforming how we in the West do mission overseas; it is also transforming the mission landscape in the West itself. Waves of immigration from the Southern and Eastern Hemispheres are coming to the cities of North America and Europe. Many of these immigrants come from parts of the world where belief in orthodox, supernatural Christianity is on the rise. As a result, thousands of new churches are being planted by non-Westerners in the formerly secular cities of London, Paris, and New York.[23] In fact, most of the largest, well-attended churches in London and Paris are led by Africans, and in New York City we have seen hundreds of new churches started by Christians from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. At first, these new Christian churches remain somewhat isolated from the broader society, evangelizing and growing within ethnic enclaves. But as the children of these Christians become educated in national universities and move into the center city, they will begin to wield greater power and influence in areas of finance, media, and culture. Anglo elites have begun inviting many of these young nonwhites into the upper echelons of business and government, not realizing that a large percentage of them are Christians.[24]

Globalization and urbanization are removing the very distinction between "home" and "foreign" missions (to use, for a moment, the old terminology).[25] Consider the example of a church I know in the borough of Queens in New York City. This church has planted three daughter churches — one in New York's neighboring College Point, one in New York's neighboring Bronx, and one in the "neighboring" Philippines. They had reached so many Filipino immigrants in their own neighborhood that these new Christians wanted to plant a daughter church among their friends and relatives in their country of origin. So they sent a large group of people out from New York City to plant a new church. This is not an isolated case. Every major city is now a portal for reaching the nations of the world. In other words, one of the very best ways to reach the far parts of the world is to reach your own city![26]

Now consider another example. We planted Redeemer Presbyterian Church in the middle of New York City — in central Manhattan. Within a few years, we had planted daughter churches in Westchester County, New York, and New Jersey (the two principal "bedroom communities" of the city). If we had originally located in any particular suburb, however, we would never have been able in so short a time to plant churches in Manhattan or in the other suburbs. Why not? You can't reach the city from the suburbs, but you can reach the suburbs from the city. Cities are like a giant heart — drawing people in and then sending them out. Students come to cities to attend school, and then they graduate and move out. Singles meet in the city, get married, and move out to the suburbs when children are born. Immigrants come to the city and live in ethnic

The people of the world are now moving into the great cities of the world many times faster than the church is.

enclaves, but as they amass assets and become more established in their new country, they move outward to gain additional space for their growing families. In each case, the movement is from the center outward. As a result, a church that thrives in the city will create a community whose members will spread naturally throughout the adjoining region and into other great cities. In other words,

ONE OF HISTORY'S GREATEST OPPORTUNITIES

Cities can have a major impact on reaching hard-to-reach peoples with the gospel. This is the belief of missionary-theologian Roger Greenway:

> It may be helpful to those who harbor misgivings about cities ... to reflect on the fact that urbanization as a present fact of life for most of the human family is a reality under the providential control of God. In Acts 17:26–27, the apostle Paul observes, "He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him." Viewed in light of these verses, city growth is not something to be perceived as entirely the work of the devil, but as part of God's providential plan in history. God's redemptive purpose behind urban growth is that "men should seek him and reach out for him"...
>
> Pressed together in metropolises, the races, tribes, and diverse people groups are geographically more accessible than ever before. In some cases the processes of change that new urbanites pass through make them more receptive to the gospel. If this is the case, world urbanization should be viewed in an eschatological as well as missionary framework. God in our time is moving climactically through a variety of social, political, and economic factors to bring earth's peoples into closer contact with one another, into greater interaction and interdependence, and into earshot of the gospel. By this movement God carries forward his redemptive purposes in history. A sign of our time is the city. Through worldwide migration to the city God may be setting the stage for Christian mission's greatest and perhaps final hour.[27]

one of the best ways to reach a region and country is to reach your own city!

THE OPPORTUNITY OF MINISTRY IN CITIES

The growth in size and influence of cities today presents the greatest possible challenge for the church. Never before has it been so important to learn how to do effective ministry in cities, and yet, by and large, evangelical Christianity in the United States is still nonurban.

Along with these challenges comes a range of unique opportunities. I see four important groups of people who must be reached to fulfill the mission of the church, and each of them can best be reached in the cities.

If the church in the West remains, for the most part, in the suburbs of Middle America and neglects the great cities, it risks losing an entire generation of American society's leaders.

1. The younger generation. The prospects for advancement, the climate of constant innovation and change, the coming together of diverse influences and people — all of these appeal to young adults. In the United States and Europe, the young disproportionately want to live in cities, and for the highly ambitious, the numbers are even higher. In a *New York Times* op-ed column, "I Dream of Denver," David Brooks looks at Pew Research Center data that shows the sharp difference between younger Americans and older Americans as to their preference for cities:

> *Cities remain attractive to the young. Forty-five percent of Americans between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four would like to live in New York City. But cities are profoundly unattractive to people with families and to the elderly. Only 14 percent of Americans thirty-five and older are interested in living in New York City. Only 8 percent of people over sixty-five are drawn to Los Angeles.*[28]

This means, of course, that if the church in the West remains, for the most part, in the suburbs of Middle America and neglects the great cities, it risks losing an entire generation of American society's leaders.

One of the reasons cities are filled with young adults is that they are also usually filled with students. In university towns it is obvious to the casual observer that students are an important part of the demographic. In large cities, however, there are often enormous numbers of undergraduate and graduate students, but the size and diversity of the urban population make college students less visible. Yet students constitute an extremely important mission field, and urban students have far more local job opportunities available to them after graduation than do those who go to school in "college towns." As a result, college students in cities who are won to the faith are a significant source of future leaders for urban churches.

2. The "cultural elites." The second group is made up of those who have a disproportionate influence on how human life is lived in a society because they exert power in business, publishing, the media, the academy, and the arts. These people live or spend much of their time in city centers. Since cities now influence the culture and values of the world more than ever, the single most effective way for Christians to influence the culture of a nation is to have large numbers of them stay in cities and simply "be the church" there. Also, for all the reasons noted above, ministry that is effective in a world city travels well. Ministry in rural areas of a country may have little transferability to rural areas in other countries. But ministry forms that are effective in one center city are likely to have wide appeal to other center cities, especially with the younger generation.

Some Christians may complain, "We are losing the culture wars." This comment comes from the fact that relatively small groups living disproportionately in cities exert far more cultural influence than evangelical Christians, who live disproportionately outside of cities. Every time I exit the 42nd Street subway station in Manhattan, I pass Viacom, the parent company of MTV. Few institutions have had a greater cultural impact on an entire generation than MTV. I once read that years of Communist rule had not been able to erode the distinct ethnic identity of the Hungarian minority in Romania. Now, however, a global youth culture is turning Hungarian youth away from their cultural roots. Global consumer youth culture is pumped from Manhattan and Hollywood into the digital devices of kids all around the world. Fifteen-year-olds in rural Mexico are now more "urban" in their sensibilities than their parents are. If churches are to have any influence on the people who create institutions like MTV, they will have to live and minister in the same places where these people live — in the city.

3. Accessible "unreached" people groups. Many people speak about the importance of engaging in mission to the hard-to-reach religious and cultural groups, people who live in remote places or in nations that forbid Christian mission work. But the currents of history are now sweeping many of these formerly unreachable people into cities as rural economies fail to sustain old ways of life.

Millions of these newcomers in the burgeoning cities of the world are more open to the Christian faith than they were in their original context. Most have been uprooted from their familiar, traditional setting and have left behind the thicker kinship and tribal networks they once relied on, and most cities in the developing world often have "next to nothing in working government services."[29] These newcomers need help and support to face the moral, economic, emotional, and spiritual pressures of city life, and this is an opportunity for the church to serve them with supportive community, a new spiritual family, and a liberating gospel message. Immigrants to urban areas have many reasons to begin attending churches, reasons that they did not have in their former, rural settings. "Rich pickings await any groups who can meet these needs of these new urbanites, anyone who can at once feed the body and nourish the soul."[31]

But there is yet another way in which cities make formerly hard-to-reach peoples accessible. As I noted earlier, the urban mentality is spreading around the world as technology connects young generations to urbanized, global hyperculture.

MOVING TO THE CITY

In *Two Cities, Two Loves*, James Montgomery Boice considered the 10 percent ratio given in Nehemiah 11:1 for repopulating Jerusalem and suggested that in America, which is less agricultural, a proportional ratio should be even higher. His point was that if more of the nation's Christians deliberately moved into the largest cities and there lived out a life of love, truth, and servanthood, the culture would be fundamentally changed.[30]

Many young people, even those living in remote places, are becoming globalized semi-Westerners, while their parents remain rooted in traditional ways of thinking. And so ministry and gospel communications that connect well with urban residents are also increasingly relevant and effective with young nonurban dwellers.

4. The poor. A fourth group of people who can and must be reached in cities is the poor. Some have estimated that one-third of the people representing the new growth in cities in the developing world will live in shantytowns. A great majority of the world's poor live in cities, and there is an important connection between reaching the urban elites and serving the poor of your city. First, an urban church's work among the poor will be a significant mark of its validity. It is one of the "good deeds" that Scripture says will lead pagans to glorify God (Matt 5:16; 1 Pet 2:12). Similarly, once cultural elites are won to Christ, discipling them includes reorienting them to spend their wealth and power on the needs of the poor and the city instead of on themselves. In other words, an urban church does not choose between ministry to the poor and ministry to the professional class. We need the economic and cultural resources of the elites to help the poor, and our commitment to the poor is a testimony to the cultural elites, supporting the validity of our message.

We can be confident that the cities of the world will continue to grow in significance and power. Because of this, they remain just as strategic — if not more so — than they were in the days of Paul and the early church when Christian mission was predominantly urban. I would argue that there is nothing more critical for the evangelical church today than to emphasize and support urban ministry.

The need is great, as is the cost — ministry in city centers is considerably more expensive on a per capita basis than it is away from the urban core. But the church can no longer ignore the profound and irreversible changes occurring in the world today. If Christians want to reach the unreached, we must go to the cities. To reach the rising generations, we must go to the cities. To have any impact for Christ on the creation of culture, we must go to the cities. To serve the poor, we must go to the cities.

Many people who are not naturally comfortable in the city will have to follow the example of Abraham. Abraham was called to leave his familiar culture and become a pilgrim, seeking the city of God (Gen 12:1 – 4; Heb 11:8 – 10). And while Christians should not deliberately seek difficulty for its own sake, can we not follow the example of the incarnate Christ, who did not live in places where he was comfortable but went where he was useful (Matt 8:20; John 4:34; Rom 15:3)? Can we not face difficulty for *his* sake (cf. Heb 11:26), embracing both the difficulties and the riches of city living?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Where have you witnessed some of the things discussed in this chapter (globalization, gentrification, city renaissance, reverse commuting, postmodernism, etc.) in the life of your nearest city? How do they affect life in that city? How do they affect ministry in that city?
2. If our future will be largely an urban culture, what changes should the church be making today to prepare and adapt?
3. One significant trend discussed in this chapter is the influx of Christian immigrant populations and their increasing access to elite levels of business and society. How do you believe their contributions will shape the future of your ministry?
4. Which of the following city-prone groups do you feel most passionate to reach: the younger generation, the "cultural elites," accessible "unreached" people groups, or the poor? Is that group present in your setting right now? How is urbanization affecting them? Take a moment to reflect on what it would be like to minister meaningfully to the group you have identified.

{ *part 4:* City Vision }

chapter 14

THE GOSPEL FOR THE CITY

I have made as strenuous a case as I can that the city is one of the highest priorities for Christian life and mission in the twenty-first century. Now I want to press even further. These chapters on City Vision may have given you the idea that I think all Christians should move into cities and serve there. To be clear, this is *not* what I am saying. I believe there must be Christians and churches everywhere there are people. In one sense, there are no "little" places or people.[1] God loves to use unimportant people (1 Cor 1:26 – 31) and unlikely places (John 1:46) to do his work. Jesus wasn't from Rome or even Jerusalem but was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth — perhaps to make this very point. We have been told that now something like 50 percent of the world's population live in cities — but this means that half the population does *not* live in urban areas, and therefore we must not discourage or devalue gospel ministry in the hundreds of thousands of towns and villages on earth. And ministry in small towns may not change a country, but it surely can have a major impact in its region.[2]

And yet a thought experiment may be illuminating here. Imagine you are in charge of establishing new churches in two different towns — one has a hundred residents, while the other has ten thousand residents. Imagine also that you have only four church planters. Where would you send them? Regardless of philosophy, I doubt anyone would send two church planters to each town on the premise that all places are equally important in ministry. It simply would not be good stewardship of God's human resources to send two pastors to a town with only a hundred residents. It is good stewardship, though, to insist that we should increase our attention and emphasis on urban ministry in a day when nonurban areas typically have more churches than cities and when cities are increasingly exerting more influence on how human life is lived in the world.

So I am not saying that all Christians should pack up and go to live and minister in urban areas. What I *am* saying is that the cities of the world are grievously underserved by the church because, in general, the people of the world are moving into cities faster than churches are. And I am seeking to use all the biblical, sociological, missiological, ecclesial, and rhetorical resources at my disposal to help the church (particularly in the United States) reorient itself to address this deficit.

But the call to the city doesn't end there. Everywhere in the world is more urban than it was ten or twenty years ago. Wherever you live, work, and serve, the city is coming to you. In a sense, every church can and must become a church for its particular city — whether that city is a great metropolis, a university town, or a village. As a result, I believe you can benefit by allowing yourself and your ministry to be intentionally shaped by the realities and patterns of urban life and culture. In order to accomplish this, we must look first at how the dynamics of the city affect our lives and then consider how churches with City Vision will minister in response to these dynamics.

Every church can and must become a church for its particular city — whether that city is a great metropolis, a university town, or a village.

HOW THE CITY WORKS ON US

By many people's reckoning, the "death of distance" should have led to a decline in cities, but it has not. If you can learn things over the Internet, the thinking went, why pay big-city prices for housing? But real learning, communication, and community are far more complex than we may care to acknowledge. A great deal of research has shown that face-to-face contact and learning can never be fully replaced by any other kind.

It is no surprise, then, that research shows us that productivity is significantly higher for companies that locate near the geographic center of "inventive activity" in their industry. Why? Proximity to others working in your field enables the infinite number of interactions, many of them informal, that turns neophytes into experts more quickly and helps experts stimulate each other to new insights. Edward Glaeser observes, "Much of the value of a dense work environment comes from unplanned meetings and observing the random doings of the people around you. Video conferencing will never give a promising young worker the ability to learn by observing the day-to-day operations of a successful mentor."[3] Other studies reveal that a high percentage of patent applications cited older patents in the same metropolitan region, so "even in our age of information technology, ideas are often geographically localized."[4]

Urban theorists call this "agglomeration." Agglomeration refers to the economic and social benefits of physically locating near one another.[5] It is not surprising, then, that more movies are produced in Los Angeles and Toronto than in Atlanta, because those cities have far larger pools of skilled laborers — writers, directors, actors, technicians — who can make movies happen. It is not surprising that new innovations in financial services come out of Manhattan or new technologies out of Silicon Valley. Why? Agglomeration. The physical clustering of thousands of people who work in the same field naturally generates new ideas and enterprises. But the benefits of agglomeration are not limited to locating near people who, *like* you, work in the same field. There are benefits to be reaped of living near large groups of people who are *unlike* you but who have skills that supplement yours.

A good case study is the world of the arts. "Artistic movements are often highly localized," even more so than in other fields.[6] Urban scholar Elizabeth Currid interviewed New York City cultural producers (fashion designers, musicians, and fine artists) and gatekeepers (gallery owners, curators, and editors), as well as owners of clubs and venues frequented by these groups, people in the media and sometimes the academy, the directors of foundations that supported the arts, and prosperous businessmen and women who often acted as patrons.[7] Art "happened" when complex interactions occurred among people in these diverse sectors of the arts ecosystem — not typically through business meetings in workplaces but through interactions at social gatherings and spontaneous meetings in informal situations. Currid found that the cultural economy depends on having "artistic and cultural producers densely agglomerated," part of a "clustered production system."[8] When these various classes of persons live in geographical proximity, thousands of enterprise-producing, culture-making, face-to-face interactions take place that could not take place otherwise.[9] As Ryan Avent puts it, "Cities are a lot like a good group of friends: what you're doing isn't nearly as important as the fact that you're doing it together."[10]

How do the dynamics of agglomeration bear on the real life of the average city Christian? First, *the*

FACE-TO-FACE

Two researchers at the University of Michigan gave groups of six students each the rules of a game to play as a team. Some groups were allowed ten minutes of face-to-face interaction to discuss strategy before playing. Other groups were given thirty minutes of electronic interaction before playing the game in the exact same way. The groups that only met electrónically before the game did far less well. This and other experiments have helped us to see that "face-to face contact leads to more trust, generosity, and cooperation than any other sort of interaction."[11] Indeed, common sense tells us that we work up to the level of those working around us.

city uniquely links you with many people **like** *you.* The city's challenges and opportunities attract the most talented, ambitious, and restless. So whoever you are, in the city you will encounter people who are far more talented and advanced than you are. Because you are placed among so many like-but-extremely-skilled people in your field, you will be consistently challenged to reach down and do your very best. You feel driven and pressed by the intensity of the place to realize every ounce of your potential. Cities draw and gather together human resources, tapping their potential for cultural development as no other human-life structure can. But sin takes this strength feature of the city — its culture-forming intensity — and turns it into a place tainted by deadly hubris, envy, and burnout. This is what sin does. It is a parasitic perversion of the good. The gospel is needed to resist the dark side of this gift.

> For our own continuing spiritual growth and well-being, we need the city perhaps more than the city needs us.

Second, *the city uniquely links you with many people* **unlike** *you.* The city attracts society's subcultures and minorities, who can band together for mutual support. It is inherently merciful to those with less power, creating safe enclaves for singles, the poor, immigrants, and racial minorities. Because you are placed among such inescapable diversity, you will be consistently challenged in your views and beliefs. You will be confronted with creative, new approaches to thought and practice and must either abandon your traditional ways and beliefs or become far more knowledgeable about and committed to them than you were before. Again, sin takes a strength feature of the city — its culture-forming diversity — and turns it into a place that undermines our prior commitments and worldviews. And again, the gospel is needed to resist the dark side of this gift.

How should Christians respond to these ways that the city challenges us? We must respond with the gospel. And how, exactly, does the gospel help us face these challenges with joy rather than fear? Obviously, it is true that we must bring the gospel to the city and hear the gospel while in the city. But we must also recognize how much *the city itself brings the gospel to us.* The city will challenge us to discover the power of the gospel in new ways. We will find people who seem spiritually and morally hopeless to us. We will think, "*Those* people will never believe in Christ." But a comment such as this is revealing in itself. If salvation is truly by grace, not by virtue and merit, why should we think that *anyone* is less likely than ourselves to be a Christian? Why would anyone's conversion be any greater miracle than our own? The city may force us to discover that we don't really believe in sheer grace, that we really believe God mainly saves nice people — people like us.

In cities we will also meet a lot of people who hold to other religions or to no religion who are wiser, kinder, and more thoughtful than we are, because even after growth in grace, many Christians are weaker people than many non-Christians. When this surprises you, reflect on it. If the gospel of grace is true, why would we think that Christians are a better kind of person than non-Christians? These living examples of common grace may begin to show us that even though we intellectually understand the doctrine of justification by faith alone, functionally we continue to assume that salvation is by moral goodness and works.

Early in Redeemer's ministry, we discovered it was misguided for Christians to feel pity for the city, and it was harmful to think of ourselves as its "savior." We had to humbly learn from and respect our city and its people. Our relationship with them had to be a consciously reciprocal one. We had to be willing to see God's common grace in their lives. We had to learn that we needed them to fill out our own understanding of God and his grace, just as they needed us.

I believe many Christians in the West avoid the city because it is filled with "the other." Because cities are filled with people who are completely unlike us, many Christians find this disorienting. Deep down, we know we don't *like* these people or don't feel safe around them. But see how easily we forget the gospel! After all, in the gospel we learn of a God who came and lived among us, became one of us, and loved us to the death, even though we were wholly other from him. The city humbles us, showing us how little we are actually shaped by the story and pattern of the gospel.

The gospel alone can give us the humility ("I have much to learn from the city"), the confidence ("I have much to give to the city"), and the courage ("I have nothing to fear from the city") to do effective ministry that honors God and blesses others. And in time we will see that, for our own continuing spiritual growth and well-being, we need the city perhaps more than the city needs us.

WHAT SHOULD CHRISTIANS DO ABOUT CITIES?

If this is how the city can change us for the better, what can we do to return the favor?

1. Christians should develop appreciative attitudes toward the city. In obedience to God, Jonah went to the city of Nineveh, but he didn't love it. In the same way, Christians may come to the city out of a sense of duty to God while being filled with great disdain for the density and diversity of the city. But for ministry in cities to be effective, it is critical that Christians appreciate cities. They should love city life and find it energizing.[12] Why is this so important?

First, because so many who live in and have influence in the city do actually *enjoy* living there. If you try to draw them into your church, they will quickly pick up on your negative attitude, which can erect a barrier in their willingness to listen to the gospel. Second, if a church consists primarily of people who dislike urban living, those people won't be staying very long. Your church will be plagued with huge turnover (as if turnover and transience aren't enough of a problem already in the city!).

Preaching and teaching that produce a city-positive church must constantly address the common objections to city living, which include beliefs that city life is "less healthy," too expensive, and an inferior place to raise families. Two additional objections are especially prevalent. One objection I commonly hear is this: "The country is wholesome; the city is corrupting." Christians should be able to recognize the bad theology (as well as bad history) behind this idea. Liberal humanism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries viewed human nature as intrinsically good and virtuous, so they concluded that human problems came from wrong socialization. In other words, we become violent and antisocial because of our environment. They taught that human society — especially urban society — teaches us to be selfish and violent. As we have seen, however, the Bible teaches that the city is simply a magnifying glass for the human heart. It brings out whatever is already inside. In the previous chapter, we examined the city's strengths for culture making, as well as its spiritual dangers. But we must remember that the city itself is not to blame for the evil that humans have sinfully brought into it.

Here is another common objection: "The country inspires; faith dies in the city." While the countryside can indeed inspire, it is quite wrong to say that the urban environment is a harder environment to find and grow in faith. As we noted earlier, many people coming from regions where Christianity is suppressed by the culture hear the gospel for the first time in the great cities where there is more of a "free market" of ideas. Millions of people who are virtually cut off from gospel witness are reachable if they emigrate to cities. Also, many who were raised as nominal Christians come to the cities where they are challenged in new ways and brought to vital, solid faith in the process. I have seen this occur thousands of times during my ministry at Redeemer. The city is, in fact, a spiritual hotbed where people both lose faith and find it in ways that do not happen in more monolithic, less pluralistic settings. This is, yet again, part of the tension of the city we see addressed in the Bible (see chapter 11).

Sometimes the contrast of the countryside and the city is drawn even more starkly. My colleague at Westminster, Harvie Conn, told me about a man who said to him, "God made the country, and man

WENDELL BERRY AND THE "AGRARIAN MIND"

Many people point to the essayist Wendell Berry as a leading light of modern agrarians who seem to make a strong case for rural living over urban living. However, while Berry does laud the life of the farm and the small town, he defines the "agrarian mind" as essentially that which values the *local*:

> The agrarian mind is ... local. It must know on intimate terms the local plants and animals and local soils; it must know local possibilities and impossibilities, opportunities and hazards. It depends and insists on knowing very particular local histories and biographies.[13]

He goes on to speak of the agrarian mind as (1) valuing work not for the money it can command but for what it provides for human flourishing; (2) valuing work that makes things that are concrete, durable, and useful; (3) embracing humility and having little need for growth and wealth; and (4) holding a commitment to a particular place for a lifetime and to conducting one's work, recreation, family life in the same place and within a web of thick, long-term, local personal relationships. Berry contrasts this with an "industrial mind" characterized by pride and a lack of respect and gratitude for nature and limitations and manifesting itself in exploitation and greed.

What this means, I believe, is that a person with an "agrarian" mind can live in a city very well. It is illuminating to compare the seminal work of Jane Jacobs (*The Death and Life of the Great American Cities*) with Berry's work. Jacobs was as committed as Berry to the importance of neighborhood—of local economies in which members of the neighborhood knew each other, had regular dealings with each other, and identified their own interests with the interests of their neighbors.

built the suburbs, but the devil made the city." The theology behind this statement is dubious to say the least. And theologically, it is not a good idea to think of the countryside as intrinsically more pleasing to God. An urban missionary, Bill Krispin, explains why. Bill once said to me, "The country is where there are more plants than people; the city is where there are more people than plants. And since God loves people much more than plants, he loves the city more than the country." I think this is solid theological logic. The apex of creation is, after all, the making of male and female in the image of God (Gen 1:26 – 27). Therefore, cities, which are filled with people, are absolutely crammed full of what God considers the most beautiful sight in his creation. As we have noted before, cities have more "image of God" per square inch than anywhere else, and so we must not idealize the country as somehow a more spiritual place than the city. Even those (like Wendell Berry) who lift up the virtues of rural living outline a form of human community just as achievable in cities as in small towns.

How can you as a church or an individual live out this value if you are not located near a metropolitan area? I believe the best strategy is to include urban ministry in your global missions portfolio. This may mean supporting individual missionaries who serve in cities; an even more effective strategy is to support church-planting ministries in global cities.[15] Another promising trend is the creation of metro-wide partnerships of churches and other agencies to support the holistic work of spreading the gospel throughout the city.

2. Christians should become a dynamic counterculture where they live. It will not be enough for Christians to simply live as individuals in the city, however. They must live as a particular kind of community. In the Bible's tale of two cities, man's city is built on the principle of personal aggrandizement (Gen 11:1 – 4), while "the city of our God ... is beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth" (Ps 48:1 – 2). In other words, the urban society God wants is based on *service*, not selfishness. Its purpose is to spread joy from its cultural riches to the whole world. Christians are called to be an *alternate city* within every earthly city, an *alternate human culture* within every human culture — to show how sex, money, and power can be used in nondestructive ways; to show how classes and races that cannot get along outside of Christ can get along in him; and to show how it is possible to cultivate by using the tools of art, education, government, and business to bring hope to people rather than despair or cynicism.

Someone may ask, "Can't Christians be an alternate city out in the suburbs?" Absolutely! This is one of our universal callings as Christians. Yet again, though, the earthly city magnifies the effect of this alternate city and its unique forms of ministry. In racially homogeneous places, it is harder to show in pragmatic ways how the gospel uniquely undermines racial barriers (see Eph 2:11 – 22). In places where few artists live, it is pragmatically harder to show the gospel's unique effect on art. In economically homogeneous places, physically removed from the human poverty that is so pervasive in the world, it is pragmatically harder for Christians to realize how much money they are spending on themselves. What is possible in the suburbs and rural towns comes into sharper focus in the city. The city illustrates in vivid detail the unique community life that is produced as the fruit of the gospel.

3. Christians should be a community radically committed to the good of their city as a whole. It is not enough for Christians to form a culture that merely "counters" the values of the city. We must also commit, with all the resources of our faith and life, to serve sacrificially the good of the whole city, and especially the poor.

It is especially important that Christians not be seduced by the mind-set of the "consumer city" — the city as adult playground. Cities attract young adults with a dizzying variety of amenities and diversions that no suburb or small town can reproduce. Even when holding constant factors such as income, education, marital status, and age, city residents are far more likely to go to a concert, visit a museum, go to the movies, or stop into a local pub than people outside of urban areas.[16] On top of this, urban residents, more than their country cousins, tend to take an unmistakable pride in sophistication and hipness. Christians must not be tempted to come to the city (or at least not to remain in the city) for these motivations. Christians indeed can be enriched by the particular joys of urban life, but ultimately they live in cities to serve.

Christians must work for the peace, security, justice, and prosperity of their neighbors, loving them in word and deed, whether or not they believe the same things we believe. In Jeremiah 29:7, God calls the Jews not just to live in the city but to love it

Jacobs called this "eyes on the street" — people who felt ownership of the environment, were committed to the common welfare, and watched the street, willing to take action if necessary. Both urban neighborhoods and small towns have mixed-land use in which residences, shops, businesses, schools, and so forth were all within walking distance of each other, which leads to more human-scale, local economy.

Jacobs's book was a polemic against the "suburbanization" of the city occurring in the 1960s by planners who were destroying local neighborhoods in order to build large-scale, homogeneous areas of retail, business offices, or residences. The New Urbanism today revels in the very small-scale, walkable, mixed-use communities that Jacobs describes. Political theorist Mark Mitchell writes these interesting words:

> Ultimately, healthy communities will only be realized when individuals commit to a particular place and to particular neighbors in the long-term work of making a place, of recognizing and enjoying the responsibilities and pleasures of membership in a local community. These good things are not the unique provenance of agrarian or rural settings. They can and have been achieved in urban and town settings.[14]

and work for its shalom — its economic, social, and spiritual flourishing. Christians are, indeed, citizens of God's heavenly city, but *these citizens are always the best possible citizens of their earthly city*. They walk in the steps of the One who laid down his life for his opponents.

Christians in cities must become a counterculture for the common good. They must be radically different from the surrounding city, yet radically committed to its benefit. They must minister to the city out of their distinctive Christian beliefs and identity. We see this balance demonstrated when we examine the early Christian understanding of citizenship. Paul used his Roman citizenship as leverage and defense in the service of his wider missional aims (Acts 16:37 – 38; 22:25 – 29; cf. 21:39; 23:27). He tells the Ephesians that because of the work of the gospel, "You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but *fellow citizens with God's people* and *members of God's household*, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph 2:19 – 20, emphasis mine).

Christians should seek to live in the city, not to *use* the city to build great churches, but to use the church's resources to seek a great, flourishing city.

And to the church in Philippi, Paul writes, "Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Phil 3:20 – 21). Though Roman citizenship was a beneficial badge and indeed carried valuable social status, Paul is clear that Christians are, first and foremost, citizens of heaven.

Joseph presents an interesting Old Testament demonstration of this tension. When he is made prince of the land (Gen 41:39 – 40), he pursues the wealth and good of *Egypt*, just as he had previously done in prison and in Potiphar's house. Through his pursuit of the good of the city, salvation comes to the people of God. This story is especially striking because God puts Joseph in the position to save *the city* from hunger, not just the people of God.

In the end, Christians live not to increase the prosperity of our own tribe and group through power plays and coercion but to serve the good of all the people of the city (regardless of what beliefs others hold). While secularism tends to make people individualistic, and traditional religiosity tends to make people tribal, the gospel should destroy the natural selfishness of the human heart and lead Christians to sacrificial service that benefits the whole city. If Christians seek power and influence, they will arouse fear and hostility. If instead they pursue love and seek to serve, they will be granted a great deal of influence by their neighbors, a free gift given to trusted and trustworthy people.

Christians should seek to live in the city, not to *use* the city to build great churches, but to use the resources of the church to seek a great, flourishing city. We refer to this as a "city growth" model of ministry rather than a strictly "church growth" model. It is the ministry posture that arises out of a Center Church theological vision.

SEVEN FEATURES OF A CHURCH FOR THE CITY

It is infinitely easier to *talk* about living out this posture "on the ground" in our cities than to actually do it. The challenge is to establish churches and other ministries that effectively engage the realities of the cities of the world. The majority of evangelical Protestants who presently control the United States mission apparatus are typically white and nonurban in background. They neither understand nor in most cases enjoy urban life. As I have been arguing, many of the prevailing ministry methods are forged outside of urban areas and then simply imported, with little thought given to the unnecessary barriers this practice erects between urban dwellers and the gospel. Consequently, when ministers go into a city, they often find it especially hard to evangelize and win urban people — and equally difficult to disciple converts and prepare Christians for life in a pluralistic, secular, culturally engaged setting. Just as the Bible needs to be translated into its readers' vernacular, so the gospel needs to be embodied and communicated in ways that are understandable to the residents of a city.

I believe churches that minister in ways that are indigenous and honoring to a city — whatever its size — exhibit seven vital features:

1. respect for urban sensibility
2. unusual sensitivity to cultural differences
3. commitment to neighborhood and justice
4. integration of faith and work
5. bias for complex evangelism
6. preaching that both attracts and challenges urban people
7. commitment to artistry and creativity

We'll unpack each of these characteristics in more detail here, as well as note where several of them are covered more fully in later chapters of the book.

1. Respect for urban sensibility. Our culture is largely invisible to us, which is why it is revelatory to leave one's society and live in a very different culture for a while. This experience enables us to see how much of our thought and behavior is not based on universal common sense but on a particular cultural practice. And it is often easier to see the big cultural differences than the small ones. Christians who move to cities within their own country (or even region) often underestimate the importance of the small cultural differences they have with urbanites. They speak and act in ways that are out of step with urban sensibilities, and if this is pointed out to them, they despise the criticism as snobbishness.

Most American evangelical churches are middle class in their corporate culture. That is, they value privacy, safety, homogeneity, sentimentality, space, order, and control. In contrast, the city is filled with ironic, edgy, diversity-loving people who have a high tolerance for ambiguity and disorder. On the whole, they value intensity and access more than comfort and control. Center-city people appreciate sophistication in communication content and mode, and yet they eschew what they consider slickness, hype, and excessive polish. Being able to strike these nuanced balances cannot be a matter of performance. Christian leaders and ministers must genuinely belong to the culture so they begin to intuitively understand it.

Center-city culture in particular is filled with well-informed, verbal, creative, and assertive people who do not respond well to authoritative pronouncements. They appreciate thoughtful presentations that are well argued and provide opportunities for communication and feedback. If a church's ministers are unable to function in an urban culture, choosing instead to create a "missionary compound" within the city, they will soon discover they cannot reach out, convert, or incorporate the people who live in their neighborhoods.

THE TRUE CHURCH

We must understand that the seven characteristics of a church that is effective in urban engagement in no way replaces the more foundational question of what, biblically speaking, constitutes a true church.[17] The marks of a true church — what it does — are the Word rightly believed and declared, and the sacraments and discipline rightly administered. The purposes of the church — what it aims to accomplish with these ministries — are the worship of God, the edification of the saints, and the witness to the world. All true churches have these characteristics.

Yet a church may have all these biblical marks and qualities, and its ministry could be wholly *unfruitful* in the city. This is true for the same reason that every preacher who believes the Word rightly and expounds it faithfully will nonetheless preach sermons that are quite useful for a certain kind of hearer and yet confusing and even unhelpful for another. For more on this dynamic, see the Introduction and part 3 ("Gospel Contextualization").

2. Unusual sensitivity to cultural differences. Effective leaders in urban ministry are acutely aware of the different people groups within their area. Because cities are dense and diverse, they are always culturally complex. This means not only that different races and socioeconomic classes are in closer physical proximity than in other settings, but that other factors, such as ethnicity, age, vocation, and religion, create a matrix of subcultures. In New York City, for example, older downtown artists (over the age of fifty) are significantly different from younger artists. The Jewish community in New York City is vast and variegated. The cultural differences among African-Americans, Africans, and Afro-Caribbeans are marked, even as they share a broad sense of identity over against white culture. Some groups clash more with particular groups than others (e.g., African-Americans and Koreans in some cities). The gay community is divided between those who want to be more integrated into mainstream culture and those who do not. Asians talk about being "1.0, 1.5, or second generation."

Fruitful urban ministers must first notice these differences and avoid thinking they are inconsequential. Then they must seek to understand these different people respectfully and navigate accordingly in communication and ministry without unnecessarily offending others. In fact, urban ministers should constantly surprise others with how well they understand other cultures. If you are an Anglo man, for example, you should occasionally hear something like, "I didn't think a white man would know about that."

Those raised in culturally homogeneous areas who move to a city soon come to realize how many of their attitudes and habits — which they thought of as simply universal common sense — were deeply tied to their race and class. For instance, Anglo-Americans don't see themselves as making decisions, expressing emotions, handling conflict, scheduling time and events, and communicating in a "white" way — they just think they are doing things the way everybody knows things ought to be done. In an urban setting, people typically become more sensitive to these blind spots. Why? Because they are acquainted with the aspirations, fears, passions, and patterns of several different groups of people through involvement with friends, neighbors, and colleagues who come from these groups. They have personally experienced how members of different ethnic or even vocational groups use an identical word or phrase to mean different things.

No church can be all things to all people. There is no culturally neutral way of doing ministry. The urban church will have to choose practices that reflect the values of *some* cultural group, and in so doing it will communicate in ways that different cultural groups will see and hear differently. As soon as it chooses a language to preach in, or the music it will sing, it is making it easier for some people to participate and more difficult for others.

Nevertheless, the ever-present challenge is to work to make urban ministry as broadly appealing as possible and as inclusive of different cultures as possible. One of the ways to do this is to have a racially diverse set of leaders "up front." When we see someone like ourselves speaking or leading a meeting, we feel welcomed in a hard-to-define way. Another way is to listen long and hard to people in our congregation who feel underrepresented by the way our church does ministry. In the end, we must accept the fact that urban churches will experience recurring complaints of racial insensitivity. Urban ministers live with the constant sense that they are failing to embrace as many kinds of people as they should. But they willingly and gladly embrace the challenge of building racial and cultural diversity in their churches and see these inevitable criticisms as simply one of the necessary costs of urban ministry.

3. Commitment to neighborhood and justice. Urban neighborhoods are highly complex. Even gentrified neighborhoods, full of professionals, may actually be "bipolar." That is, alongside the well-off residents in their expensive apartments, private schools, and various community associations and clubs is often a "shadow neighborhood" filled with many who live in poverty, attend struggling schools, and reside in government housing.

Urban ministers learn how to exegete their neighborhoods to grasp their sociological complexity. They are obsessed with studying and learning about their local communities. (Academic training in urban ethnography, urban demographics, and urban planning can be a great help to a church's lay leaders and staff members.) But faithful churches do not exegete their neighborhoods simply to target people groups, although evangelistic outreach is one of the goals. They are looking for ways to strengthen the health of their neighborhoods, making them safer and more humane places for people to live. This is a way to seek the welfare of the city, in the spirit of Jeremiah 29.

Urban churches train their members to be neighbors in the city, not just consumers.

Urban churches train their members to be neighbors in the city, not just consumers. As we have seen, cities attract young professionals by providing something of a "theme park" with thousands of entertainment and cultural options, and many new urban residents tend to view the city as simply a place where they can have fun, develop a résumé, and make friends who will be of help to them in the future. They plan to do this for a few years and then leave. In other words, they are *using* the city rather than living in it as neighbors (as Jesus defines the term in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25 – 37).

In the middle years of the twentieth century, Jane Jacobs wrote the classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs's great contribution came in demonstrating the importance of street life for civil society. She observed how foot traffic and street life and a mixture of residences and businesses (viewed negatively by suburban zoners and even many urban planners at the time) were critical for economic vitality, for safety, for healthy human relationships, and for a strong social fabric. Jacobs was a major opponent of large-scale urban projects in the mid-twentieth century, the very projects that eventually ruined neighborhoods and the street life she had promoted.

Jacobs writes the following:

> *Looking at city neighborhoods as organs of self-government, I can see evidence that only three kinds of neighborhoods are useful: (1) the city as a whole; (2) street neighborhoods; and (3) districts of large, subcity size (composed of 100,000 people or more in the case of the largest cities).*
>
> *Each of these kinds of neighborhoods has different functions, but the three supplement each other in complex fashion.*[18]

Jacobs explains how each of these is indeed a neighborhood and how each requires the participation of all urban residents to keep the city healthy. In other words, you must know your literal neighbors (your street neighborhood) and have some familiarity with the blocks around your residence (your district). And yet this in itself is not enough. "Ward politics" — in which one neighborhood pits its own good against the good of the other parts of the city — is unwholesome and unhealthy. So it is important for Christians and Christian ministries to find ways to be neighbors to the whole city, not just to their immediate street neighborhood. Failing to engage in the interests of the entire city often results in a lack of involvement in helping the poorest residents of the city. It is equally important that a church not minister just to the whole city while ignoring its local neighborhood. If this happens, a church can become a commuter church that no longer knows how to reach the kind of people who live in their immediate vicinity.

Urban churches, then, should be known in their community as a group of people who are committed to the good of all their neighbors, near and far. It takes this type of holistic commitment from all residents and institutions to maintain a good quality of life in the city, and a church that is not engaged in this manner will (rightly) be perceived by the city as tribal.

4. Integration of faith and work. Traditional evangelical churches tend to emphasize personal piety and rarely help believers understand how to maintain and apply their Christian beliefs and

RENTERS AND NEIGHBORHOOD

One "occupational hazard" of urban church planting is having a new church rent its worship space and therefore only *corporately* reside in a particular neighborhood for the few hours during which they rent the space. Often this means, on the one hand, that the neighbors have no idea there is a church meeting in that space; on the other hand, church members feel very little responsibility to "love their neighbors." It is important for churches that rent space to own their neighborhood. Church leaders should therefore be intentional about inhabiting their neighborhood. They should go to local community boards and neighborhood association meetings, as well as contact local government officials and representatives to discover how they can best serve the needs of the neighborhood. This has not been a strength of Redeemer Church in the past, and we are working to change this now that we have moved into our first owned space on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

practice in the worlds of the arts, business, scholarship, and government. Many churches do not know how to disciple members without essentially pulling them out of their vocations and inviting them to become heavily involved in church activities. In other words, Christian discipleship is interpreted as consisting largely of activities done in the evening or on the weekend.

Many vocations of city dwellers — fashion and the media, the arts and technology, business and finance, politics and public policy — demand great amounts of time and energy. These are typically not forty-hour-a-week jobs. They are jobs that dominate a person's life and thinking, and urban Christians are confronted with ethical and theological issues every day in the workplace. Preaching and ministry in urban churches must therefore help congregants form networks of believers within their vocational field and assist them in working through the theological, ethical, and practical issues they face in their work.

In addition to the practical issues of how to do their individual work, urban Christians need a broader vision of how Christianity engages and influences culture. As we have discussed, cities are culture-forming incubators, and believers in such places have a significant need for guidance on how Christian faith should express itself in public life. For more on this subject, see part 5 (Cultural Engagement) and part 7 (Integrative Ministry).

5. Bias for complex evangelism. Two kinds of urban churches can grow without evangelism. The first is the ethnic/immigrant church. While many ethnic churches are evangelistic, it is possible for them to grow without conversions, as new immigrants are always looking for connections to their own people in the city. Ethnic churches therefore become informal "community centers" for people of the same race and subculture — and they can grow simply by gathering new immigrants who want to be part of the fellowship. Second, churches in Western center cities can grow without evangelism by meeting the needs of one particular "immigrant subculture" — evangelical Christians — through preaching, music, children's programs, and so forth. In the past, in cities outside of the southern and midwestern United States, there simply was no constituency of "church shoppers" to attract. However, during the urban renaissance of the last fifteen years, this situation has changed, and cities have become desirable destinations for young adults from all over the country. Redeemer Presbyterian Church's experience is a good way to understand this phenomenon.

Redeemer was begun in Manhattan at the end of the 1980s, during the end of an era of urban decline. Crime was high and the city was losing population, and there were few or no Christians moving into New York City from the rest of the country. During the first several years of Redeemer's existence, it grew through aggressive but winsome evangelism. An evangelistic consciousness permeated the young congregation, and several hundred people came to faith out of nonbelief and nonchurched backgrounds over the first five years.

By the mid-1990s, the urban regeneration had begun, and we noticed that young adults from Christian backgrounds were moving to the cities. By the end of the decade, we found that we could (and did) grow substantially by drawing these folks in and helping them live out their Christian lives in service to the city. This is, of course, a very good and important thing, but it can also mask a lack of evangelism, and in the end, nonevangelistic church growth can't help reach the city in the most profound way. Recognizing this danger, our church has recommitted itself to reigniting our ethos of evangelism.

Not only must an urban church be committed to evangelism; it must be committed to the *complexity* of urban evangelism. There is no "one size fits all" method or message that can be used with all urban residents. For example, it is impossible for a Christian minister in London to share the gospel in exactly the same way with an atheist native Scot or a Muslim from Pakistan — yet they may both be the minister's literal neighbors. Urban evangelism requires immersion in the various cultures' greatest hopes, fears, views, and objections to Christianity. It requires a creative host of different means and venues, and it takes great courage.

6. Preaching that both attracts and challenges urban people. Perhaps the greatest challenge for preachers in urban contexts is the fact that many secular and nonbelieving people may be in the audience. Of course, urban congregations can be as ingrown as any others, but certain dynamics of urban life can more readily make city church gatherings "spiritually mixed" and filled with nonbelievers. Urban centers have higher percentages of single people, and it is far easier for a single Christian to get a single, non-Christian friend to come to a church gathering than it is for a Christian family to get an entire non-Christian family to come. Singles make unilateral decisions (without having to consult others), tend to spend more time out of their homes, and are more open to new experiences. Also, cities are not "car cultures"; they are pedestrian cultures, and it is not unusual for people to simply walk off the street into church out of curiosity. Finally, cities are places where people come to "make it," are often separated from extended families, and are under a great deal of stress. As a result, urban people are often in a spiritual search mode and can be hungry for human connection and a sense of belonging.

The challenge for the urban preacher is to preach in a way that edifies believers and engages and evangelized nonbelievers at the same time. We will speak more about evangelistic worship in chapter 23. But here are some pointers.

First, be sure to preach sermons that ground moral exhortation in Christ and his work (see the section in chapter 6 titled "Preaching for Renewal"). Show how we live as we should only if we believe in and apply Christ's work of salvation as we should. In this way nonbelievers hear the gospel each week, yet believers have their issues and problems addressed as well.

Second, be very careful to think about your audience's premises. Don't assume, for example, that everyone listening trusts the Bible. So when you make a point from the Bible, it will help to show that some other trusted authority (such as empirical science) agrees with the Bible. Use it to promote trust of the Bible, saying something like, "See, the Bible was telling us centuries ago what science now confirms." That will help convince your hearers of that point so you can move on. By the end of the sermon, of course, you will be appealing only to God's Word, but in the early stages of the sermon you invite nonbelievers along by showing respect for their doubts about the Bible's reliability.

Third, do "apologetic sidebars." Try to devote one of the three or four sermon points mainly to the doubts and concerns of nonbelievers. Keep in your head a list of the ten or so biggest objections people have to Christianity. More often than not, the particular Scripture text has some way to address them. Always treat people's typical doubts about Christianity with respect. Jude reminds us to "be merciful to those who doubt" (Jude 22). Never give the impression that

"all intelligent people think like I do." Don't hesitate to say, "I know this Christian doctrine may sound outrageous, but would you consider this . . . ?"

Fourth, address different groups directly, showing that you know they are there, as though you are dialoguing 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 think this is narrow-minded — but the text says this, which speaks to this very issue."

Fifth, consider demeanor. The young secularists of New York City are extremely sensitive to anything that smacks of artifice to them. Anything that is too polished, too controlled, too canned will seem like salesmanship. They will be turned off if they hear a preacher use noninclusive gender language, make cynical remarks about other religions, adopt a tone of voice they consider forced or inauthentic, or use insider evangelical tribal jargon. In particular, they will feel "beaten up" if a pastor yells at them. The kind of preaching that sounds passionate in the heartland may sound like a dangerous rant in certain subcultures in the city.

Sixth, show a deep acquaintance with the same books, magazines, blogs, movies, and plays — as well as the daily life experiences — that your audience knows. Mention them and interpret them in light of Scripture. But be sure to read and experience urban life across a spectrum of opinion. There is nothing more truly urban than showing you know, appreciate, and digest a great diversity of human opinion. During my first years in New York, I regularly read *The New Yorker* (sophisticated secular), *The Atlantic* (eclectic), *The Nation* (older, left-wing secular), *The Weekly Standard* (conservative but erudite), *The New Republic* (eclectic and erudite), *Utne Reader* (New Age alternative), *Wired* (Silicon Valley libertarian), *First Things* (conservative Catholic). As I read, I imagine dialogues about Christianity with the writers. I almost never read a magazine without getting a scrap of a preaching idea.

7. Commitment to artistry and creativity. According to the United States census, between 1970 and 1990 the number of people describing themselves as "artist" more than doubled, from 737,000 to 1.7 million. Since 1990, the number of artists continued to grow another 16 percent to nearly two million. Professional artists live disproportionately in major urban areas, and so the arts are held in high regard in the city, while in nonurban areas little direct attention is typically given to them. Urban churches must be aware of this. First, they should have high standards for artistic skill in their worship and ministries. If you do not have such standards, your church will feel culturally remote to the average urban dweller who is surrounded by artistic excellence even on the streets where talented artists sing and perform.

By his grace, Jesus lost the city-that-was, so we could become citizens of the city-to-come, making us salt and light in the city-that-is.

Second, city churches should think of artists not simply as persons with skills to use. They must connect to them as worshipers and hearers, communicating that they are valued for both their work and their presence in the community. This can be done in a variety of ways. One way includes being sensitive to your own region's or city's particular art history (e.g., Nashville is a music center; New England and the Midwest have many writers; New Mexico is a center for visual artists). Take time to listen to the artists and musicians in your church to understand something about the nature of the local artistic community and how the creative process works. Do your best to work with local artists and musicians rather than flying in your favorite artists long-distance for concerts or shows. When you make use of artists' gifts, take their advice on how the music and the art should be done; don't simply give orders to them.

God has given us the city for his purposes, and even though sin has harmed it, we should use the resources of the gospel to repair broken cities. Jesus himself went to the city and was crucified "outside the city gate" (Heb 13:12), a biblical metaphor for forsakenness. By his grace, Jesus lost the city-that-was, so we could become citizens of the city-to-come (Heb 11:10; 12:22), making us salt and light in the city-that-is (Matt 5:13 – 16).

So we urge *all* the people of God to recognize and embrace the strategic intensity of cities — and therefore to respond to the urgent call to be *in the city* and *for the city* from every coordinate on the globe. City Vision recognizes God's creational intentions for cities and calls the people of God to be the city of God within the city of man.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. If you are not located in a city, how might City Vision shape and improve the fruitfulness of your current ministry?
2. How is agglomeration evident around you? Which types of trades, skills, inventors, or culture makers are concentrated most highly in your area? In what ways can your ministry seek face-to-face opportunities to minister to and through this population — that is, to become an "agglomerizing" church?
3. Keller writes, "The city itself brings the gospel to us. The city will challenge us to discover the power of the gospel in new ways." How does this chapter suggest this happens? How have you experienced this?
4. Which of the seven features of a church for the city does your church currently exhibit? How might those outside your community answer this question?