

**A Biblical Basis
for
Urban Ministry**

by

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Introduction

I consider it a real privilege to present this paper to this body of believers who are all deeply interested in obeying the word of Jeremiah 29:6 to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile." I hope the truth of these words will become alive to us as we proceed.

The fact that we are spending time considering the biblical basis for urban ministry is very important. It is very easy for churchmen to become involved in programs and movements without taking time to consider the basis for such efforts. If we are to truly build the Kingdom of God, however, we must be sure that what we are doing is firmly based on scripture. I feel that urban ministry is crucial to building the Kingdom of God. It is therefore crucial that we understand the biblical basis for urban ministry.

When I began to look at this subject I discovered there were several possible directions to go. But since I lacked both the mandate and the ability to write a book, I have confined myself to one direction, and that is, "What is a biblical basis for being concerned with urban ministry?" I am focusing in this paper on the "why" of urban ministry, rather than the "how" or "what."

1. The Strategy of the Early Church

At first glance, the scriptures yield a quite obvious basis for urban ministry. The strategy of the early church seems to have contained a strong emphasis on urban outreach. The great commission of Acts 1:8 is quoted by almost everyone as a basis for their particular ministry and indeed part of the greatness of this commission is its breadth. I find it interesting, however, because it begins with the city, Jerusalem. This makes sense because that is where the disciples were. There is a symbolic value to Jerusalem, however, that goes beyond that of a mere starting place. Jerusalem was the Holy City, the site of the temple, the place where Jesus met so many crises and was crucified. In the Book of Revelation, Jerusalem becomes associated with Babylon as in opposition to God (Revelation 11:1-13), and then is transfigured into the New Jerusalem, the City of God. So I see it as a symbol for all cities and a very appropriate place for the witness of the church to begin.

With the beginning of persecution, in Acts 8, we find the early church being scattered to many places throughout Judea, Samaria, and eventually the rest of the world. It is interesting that the Book of Acts records the spread of the church into first, the towns of Judea and Samaria, then to Damascus, Joppa, Caesarea, and Antioch, and finally to the rest

of the world. As the gospel is spread, its movement is traced by the cities to which it went. Most of the cities mentioned were important cities in the Roman Empire.

The urban strategy of the early church reached its height under the Apostle Paul. More than any other person in the New Testament, Paul seems to have pursued an intended urban strategy. As we follow his missionary journeys through the Book of Acts, we see him moving from one major metropolitan area to another. When coming into a new region he usually began in the largest city in the region and then let the gospel spread throughout the region from the city. This strategy can be seen from the time Paul spent in Corinth, a major commercial center, and in Ephesus, the capital of the province of Asia. His base of operations was Antioch in Syria, one of the major cities of the Roman Empire. Most of Paul's letters were written to churches in major cities. So at least part of Paul's effectiveness as a missionary can be attributed to his urban strategy.

This urban strategy continued for some time during the growth of the early church. History reveals the major role played by such cities as Rome, Alexandria, and Constantinople in the development of the church. The gospel was spread widely and rapidly because it was being preached at the crossroads of the world. Today, historic Christianity seems on the defensive. Meanwhile, the Jehovah's Witnesses, the "Moonies" and dozens of other groups are on the offensive with a strong urban strategy. If the church of Jesus Christ is going to ever again recover the effectiveness of its early years it must take its stand in the cities, the crossroads of the world.

2. The Mandate of Compassion for the Poor

The second basis for urban ministry which I see in the scriptures arises out of the mandate we have been given to care for the poor, disadvantaged and oppressed of the world.

This mandate begins in Genesis 4 with Cain asking God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" In response to God's question about his brother Abel. The implied answer, of course, is yes. That question serves as a good hook on which to hang much of what the Bible says about our responsibility to the poor. The treatment of the poor by God's people is one of the major subjects of the Bible. In fact, according to Harold Oostoyk in his writings on "poorology" in *Inside and The Other Side*, ten percent of the Scriptures, in about 400 passages, with over 1,000 verses, talk about helping the poor.

The Jewish Law made it very plain the Israelite was to be concerned with his brother's welfare. In setting down the Law it seems like God was establishing a minimum standard of living below which no one should be allowed to live. Deuteronomy 15:7-8 states;

If there is among you a poor man, one of your brethren...you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him, and lend him sufficient for his need.

In various places the law outlines rights for slaves, debtors, widows, orphans, and the poor, covering almost every imaginable kind of needy person. God's Law demanded compassion for the poor.

The "Wisdom Literature" continues the subject. The Psalms speak of God's promise that "He does not forget the afflicted." (Psalm 9:126) In other places this is amplified to include the poor, widows, and fatherless. A large segment of the Book of Proverbs deals with responsibility for the poor and justice for the oppressed. Proverbs 14:21 and 31 are typical of what is said;

**He who despises a hungry man does wrong but
he who is generous to the poor is happy.**

and

**He who oppresses the poor insults his Maker;
he who is generous to the needy honors Him.**

The writer of Proverbs points out that not only are we to care for the poor but neglecting to do so is sin.

The writings of the prophets build these thoughts into a compelling call for compassion and justice, mixed with strong warnings of what happens when God's people forget. The prophets in fact indicate that one of the reasons for the downfall of Israel was her neglect and oppression of the poor. (Amos 2:6-7) I was pleased that President Carter in his inaugural address based part of his plans for America on Micah 6:7-8, which in many ways sums up what the prophets say,

**He has showed you, O man, what is good; and
what does the Lord require of you but to do
justice, and to love kindness, and to walk
humbly with your God?**

The mandate to show compassion to the poor receives its clearest proclamation from Jesus Christ. In his inaugural address in Luke 4:18-19 He quotes the prophet Isaiah,

**The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because
He has anointed me to preach good news to
the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives and recovering of sight to
the blind, to set at liberty those who are
oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year
of the Lord.**

When John the Baptist sent his disciples to check out Jesus He told them;

Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them.

(Luke 7:22-23)

From the beginning of His ministry to the end, Jesus was constantly showing compassion and instructing His disciples to do likewise.

The multitudes that thronged around Jesus, like flocks of leaderless sheep, brought forth great compassion from Him. He proclaimed a new era of human responsibility with the story of the Good Samaritan and the question, "Who was this man's neighbor?" (Luke 1:29-37) As Jesus moved from town to town His heart was constantly open to those who were sick, suffering, poor, and oppressed. He summed up the whole law into one command,

Love the Lord your God with all your soul and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-39)

In comparison with the Old Testament Law and the Prophets, Jesus sets a standard of social behavior and concern for one's fellow man that goes far beyond any legal requirement. The Sermon on the Mount speaks about a life style of compassion that encompasses all of life. Finally, Jesus makes concern for meeting the needs of people a criterion for entry into Heaven.

Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me. (Matthew 25:41-43)

The early church continued this concern as evidenced by the election of the seven in Acts 6 to care for the widows and others in need. In Acts 11:27-30 we read of the first "compassion" offering. Paul's letters are filled with exhortations to care for the needs of others. James speaks of the relationship between works and faith. And John in 1 John 3:16-18 writes,

By this we know love, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or speech but in deed

and truth.

This brief study certainly reveals the mandate of compassion for the poor but what does it say about urban ministry? Very simply this: in our world the poor and others in need are congregated in the city. City after city around the world is being flooded by the hungry, unemployed, diseased and hopeless. Why do you think New York is broke? People go where they can find the most help and bleak though prospects may be, that is usually the city. Our cities, both in America and throughout the world, have become dumping grounds for the refuse of society. These are the people Jesus was talking about in Matthew 25. And it is these people of whom Jesus is asking the question, "Who is their neighbor?"

If we are serious about obeying the Biblical mandate to care for the poor, then we will sooner or later have to find our way to the city. May God make it sooner!

3. Building the City of God

There is a third Scriptural basis which I see for Urban Ministry. This is one I find most exciting and interesting but also most elusive. It involves building the City of God.

Unfortunately, we do not find anywhere in the Bible a record of God saying, "Go to the city, for there the need is greatest." We do find Jesus crying over Jerusalem, but we see Him spending very little time there. Most of the time the Scriptures read like God and the city are at war. The first time man is able to build a great city, God ruins it. The city is spoken of as if it personified evil and rebellion against God. If this is true, how can we be concerned with redeeming our cities and transforming them into "Cities of God."

In his book *The Meaning of the City*, Jacques Ellul traces the history of this struggle between God and the city back to the builder of the first city, Cain. When Cain fled from the presence of God he went and built a city. Ellul feels he did this to give himself a sense of security, "a settled spot in his wandering." Cain rejected God and then sought to build security for himself in the face of a hostile world.

Ellul goes on to trace the development of the city through Nimrod, the first builder of great cities, to the tower of Babel and then to Babylon and all it stands for. Cities were first built to give man a sense of security in the midst of a very unfriendly environment. This in itself is not bad, but it seems that from the beginning man wanted to provide security for himself rather than finding it in God. The city from the start excluded God.

The city now, more than perhaps anything else, symbolizes man's achievement. Man's technology, his abilities, his creativity, have made urban life possible. Until just a few hundred years ago urban life as we know it was impossible. The "state of the art" of sanitation, distribution, housing and medicine made urban areas of more than a few hundred thousand impossible. Modern man has accomplished fantastic things to enable him to live in at least relative security and comfort in modern cities, usually, unfortunately, without God.

In his chapter on "The Builders," in which he traces the development of the city in the Bible, Ellul seems to feel that there is opposition, almost hostility, between God and the city. He portrays urban civilization as a "warring civilization." 1 He says,

It is only in an urban civilization that man
has the metaphysical possibility of saying,
"I killed God." 2

I am not yet sure I agree with that kind of negative evaluation but anyone who has spent any amount of time living in the midst of a city will agree that there certainly seems to be tension between the city and God. I think I agree most with Ellul's analysis of the city when he writes,

The city has, then, a spiritual influence.
It is capable of directing and changing a
man's spiritual life. It brings its power
to bear in him and changes his life, all
his life, not just his house. 3

Many of us here have personally feel this pressure and seen its effect of the lives of people, both in and out of our churches. It presents one of the greatest challenges to ministry the church has ever faced.

What then is God's attitude toward the city? Is it hostility on His part as well? I don't think do, even tough from reading Old Testament history it might seem so. God, of course, will not tolerate any threat to His sovereignty and when the city is that, He opposes it. When the people of the city look to Him for help and security, rather than to themselves and the city, He accepts it. Ellul points out that God accepted David's offer of Jerusalem as the site for the temple because David was looking toward God for the city's security, rather than to its walls. God promises "to save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah" (Psalm 69:36) but only when He is in control. In ancient Israel God ordered the creation of cities of refuge where men could flee for justice. God does not reject the city, He only rejects the principles on which most are founded and by which most are run.

It is in Jesus that we see God's compassion for the city most eloquently expressed. Jesus' compassion was directed toward Jerusalem, but as we have already seen, Jerusalem can stand as a symbol for all cities. Jesus seems to have had rather mixed feelings about the city. He recognized its apathy, if not hostility, toward Him and yet His heart was constantly broken by its spiritual poverty. He cried out;

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets
and stoning those who are sent to you! How
often I would have gathered your children
together as a hen gathers her brood under
her wings, and you would not. (Luke 13:34)

As He rode down the hill into the city on Palm Sunday His heart broke. In less than a week the city would crucify Him, yet He wept with compassion,

**Would that even today you knew the things
that make for peace! (Luke 19:42)**

He knew that nothing short of His death and resurrection could provide the power needed to redeem it. For Jesus the city was the place of crisis. The place of constant testing. The place where finally He was killed. It is still so today. Yet the city was the place that seemed to move Jesus most to compassion. It is the power of this resurrection that offers the city any hope.

It seems then that God does care for the city. He desires to see its redemption more, perhaps, than anything else because of its opposition to Him. When seen through the eyes of Jesus, God longs to gather the city to Himself, to take what man has made and make it His own, to turn the city into the City of God. Is it possible?

The story of Jonah and Ninevah is one of the best illustrations of what can happen. It also gives some good clues as to what our relationship to the city should be. Ninevah is proof of God's love for the city. She was a great and very wicked city which God fully intended to destroy. Yet when she responded to Jonah's one man "Here's Life, Ninevah" campaign, God changed His mind. The city's repentance of its sins opened the way for it to become a city of God. This was accomplished by Jonah speaking prophetically to her sin and calling her to acknowledge God as Lord. Which is what we are to do. Jonah did not begin by calling for reform but by pronouncing judgement. The reforms came as a consequence. The Christian is to always speak prophetically to the sin of the city. The Christian's presence in the city must always be uncomfortable, for both the city and the Christian. When accommodation is found the prophetic message is lost. Ellul says,

When the city accepts your work you have become false. 4

This is true until the city becomes the City of God.

But it is often difficult to know how to be a prophet in the city. People do not always respond like they did to Jonah. How then, can we speak prophetically? The Bible indicates that it is through our very presence that we are best able to minister and speak to the city. A negative illustration of this is the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham plead with God to save the cities, finally "plea bargaining" God to save the city if ten righteous persons could be found. They were not found and the cities were destroyed. Proverbs 11:11 states the principle,

**By the blessing of the upright a city is exalted
but is it overthrown by the mouth of the wicked.**

The presence of righteous people in the city has a redemptive impact on the city, in the eyes of God. Sodom and Gomorrah prove that the reverse is also true. What does this say to us about Christian presence in the cities of our world today?

Jesus takes this ministry of presence a step further when He talks about His disciples being the light of the world and the salt of the earth. (Matthew 5:13-14) This imagery is especially appropriate to urban ministry today because it assumes a minority situation. Wherever they are, Christians are to let their light shine through their good works. But more than that, the light speaks prophetically to the conditions and people it illuminates. The light reveals the truth. Thus, the Christian cannot let his light shine in the city without speaking prophetically to the city. The role of salt is a little harder to understand but its main function is to flavor through its presence, although it also has purifying and preserving functions. Of course there are also warnings that go along with this imagery and we who work in the city must periodically check the brightness of our light and the saltiness of our salt.

It is important to remember where the power to turn the city of man into the City of God comes from, and that is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We know from experience that while the city may represent man's highest achievements it also represents his greatest defeats. The city creates problems man is incapable of solving. The fact of the power of the resurrection is our only source of power and hope. Let me quote Ellul again,

Man is not to be counted on to transform the problem of the city. He is no more capable of transforming the environment chosen and built for him by the devil, than he is of changing his own nature. Only God's decisive act is sufficient to change the facts of history. Only the resurrection is sufficient to dispossess the demons of their domain. 5

Man's work, our work, is to appropriate that power and make the truth known. The demons of the city have been defeated. The power of sin to corrupt the city and its residents has been broken. We who work in the name of Jesus have the power at our disposal to begin, at least, to transform the city of man into the City of God.

It is possible to build the City of God. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Abraham looked forward to the city which has its foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10)

Neither he nor his heirs found it. But we who follow Christ both in time and discipleship will. Hebrews goes on, "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (Hebrews 12:12)

The City of God like the Kingdom of God is both here now and is coming, to be brought to completion in the age which is to come. We have been given the responsibility of building it and working for its coming.

Military and political strategy tells us that as the city goes, so goes the kingdom. As the building of the City of God goes, so goes the building of the Kingdom of God. The city was the place of greatest crisis and testing for Jesus. In the end the city rejected and killed Him. The city will certainly be the place of greatest testing and crisis for the church today. In the end, according to the Revelation, the city will reject and kill the church. The Revelation also assures us there is victory at the end. The City of God and the Kingdom of God will prevail. Let us get on with the Building.

Notes

- 1 Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William N. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970) p. 13
- 2 *Ibid.*, pg. 16
- 3 *Ibid.*, pg. 9
- 4 *Ibid.*, pg. 37
- 5 *Ibid.*, pg. 170

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