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## The Mother of All Challenges: Constant Change, Enormous Needs, But-for-God Impossible Difficulties

John Thompson  
*Armitage Baptist Church*

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John Thompson

**abstract**

Half of the population of the world lives in cities of one million or more. If we don't reach and disciple from these masses, our future missionary and pastoral force will be diminished. The book *Urban Impact* is a trumpet call to muster our forces but also deals with the philosophy and practical principles that make any ministry in the city successful. Brandishing a practical writing style coupled with real life experiences, the author helps the reader understand the problems, burdens, joys, and powerful impact cities have on the rest of society.

It was one o'clock in the morning, and I awoke with a whining sound in my ears. In the fog of sleep, I thought it was the eerie, human-like sound occasionally made by cats as they whine. As the cobwebs began to lift, I could hear the sound of an engine revving and tires screeching. I soon realized the whining was not a cat at all but the sound of a young lady who was being dragged back and forth in the alley behind my home. As I jumped out of bed and looked out my rear window, I could see someone in the dark hanging out of the passenger side of a car. In the moonlight, I could see that the person had little on, with her blouse pulled up over her shoulders and caught in the door mechanism. I screamed for the driver to let

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the woman go; slightly after but almost in tandem, a man in a house across the alley hollered the same words. With a shout, the driver said that he was trying to let her go, and as he pushed the door open, she fell, curled up on the alley pavement. As the car sped away, the woman struggled to her feet. Seeing she was partly naked and in need of help, I asked my wife to take a blouse to her and see if we could bring her into our home or provide help in some way. She took the blouse, refused our help, and began walking down the alley as a blue strobe light began to appear. Such is an example of experiences one may face in the inner city of a large urban area.

Why is there so much evil in the city? What are the qualities and benefits of cities? What are the problems faced each day as one lives in a large urban area? How are the cities of our world changing? How is urban ministry both a biblical mandate and the most effective strategy for reaching people for Jesus Christ? These and other questions will be answered as we explore one of the most amazing and effective opportunities for discipleship known to man.

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What do we mean when we use the term urban? The U. S. Government Census Bureau offers a definition of “urbanized areas” as being the fully developed area of a city which may have one or more “central places” and adjacent built-up areas (i.e., suburbs or “urban fringe”) with a minimum population of fifty thousand people.<sup>1</sup> “An inner city can be defined as a poverty area in which there is much government activity and control but little activity by the private sector. Often merchandisers, businesses, and churches have left the area. . . . But governmental agencies, public housing, and social institutions are visible.”<sup>2</sup>

### **why did God design the city?**

According to *Redeemer* magazine, God designed the city to be first of all “a place of refuge and shelter for the weak. . . . The earliest cities provided refuge from wild animals and marauding tribes and criminals. . . . In Israel, God designated certain cities to be ‘cities of refuge’. . . . Today the city is a place where minorities can cluster for support in an alien land, where new immigrants can work together for a foothold in a new world, where refugees can find shelter, and where the homeless and poor can better eke out an existence.”<sup>3</sup> The weak and powerless need the city and cannot survive in the suburbs and small towns.

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<sup>1</sup> “Urban and Rural Classification.” [On-line] (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000); available from [www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua\\_2k.html](http://www.census.gov/geo/www/ua/ua_2k.html); Internet..

<sup>2</sup> Ed Marciniak, “Orientation Address, Seminary Consortium for Urban Pastoral Education Orientation.” Chicago: Latino Seminario, September 23, 1978.

<sup>3</sup> “The Importance of the City,” *Redeemer*. Manhattan, NY: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, pg. 2.

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Secondly, God designed the city “as a cultural and human development center.

The city stimulates and forces the gifts, capacities, and talents of people, the deep potentialities in the human heart.” To summarize the *Redeemer* magazine article, the city brings you into contact with so many people with different abilities and skills, producing greater works of art, science, technology, and culture. Even the description of the new Babylon shows the power of the city to develop culture. In Revelation 18 we see the city is a place of music and the arts (v. 22a), of crafts and manufacturing (v. 22b), of technological advance (v. 23a), and of trade and retailing (v. 23c).<sup>4</sup>

28 Thirdly, God designed the city “as a place of spiritual searching and temple building. Ancient cities were built around a ‘ziggurat’—the original skyscrapers—temples where a particular god was thought to ‘come down.’ Cities were the royal residences of the god, and the city was dedicated to him/her. When God creates a new city in the desert, he does so by dwelling among his people in the tabernacle, for the city of God will be his dwelling place. Later, in the earthly city of Jerusalem, the city stands as the central integrating point of the city’s architecture and as apex of its art and science and technology. Thus *any* city has a spiritual vacuum within it. The turmoil and climate of cities make people religious seekers. Protestant Christians abandoning the city inevitably make it easier for the city to turn to false gods.”<sup>5</sup>

**a community of assets and liabilities**

As millions of immigrants approached the coast of the United States at New York City, they were met by the Statue of Liberty with an inscription printed on the base of the monument with these words: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to be free. . . . Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me.” Since the earliest settlers traveled from England to this country, America has been a country of immigrants. During the nineteenth century, huge numbers met the Statue of Liberty as they came in waves to escape poverty, famine, political unrest, or persecution. Many came for better education or for personal advancement. On every continent, large cities are the gateways to the world; the port of entry for millions of immigrants. Ray Bakke states, “The twentieth century has produced the greatest global migration in the history of the world. The Southern hemisphere is coming North; East is coming West and everyone is coming to the cities.”<sup>6</sup> Most of these refugees immigrate to the cities.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), 116.

*Cities are known for diversity.* The ethnicity of the world is clearly present in the cities. Ray Bakke has stated, “Yesterday, cities were in the nations; today all the nations are in the cities.”<sup>7</sup> More immigrants entered the United States in the 1990s than in any previous decade.<sup>8</sup> The largest immigrant populations are in New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

Table 1<sup>10</sup>

Immigrant Gateways, Year 2000		
City	Foreign-Born Population	Percent Foreign-Born
New York	2,871,032	35.9
Los Angeles	1,512,720	40.9
Chicago	628,903	21.7
Houston	516,105	26.4
San Jose	329,757	36.8
San Diego	314,227	25.7
Dallas	290,436	24.4
San Francisco	285,541	36.8
Phoenix	257,325	19.5
Miami	215,739	59.5

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This immigrant growth will not end anytime soon. According to environmental writer Mark Nowak, it is estimated that “60 percent of the population increase in the United States between 1994 and 2050 will be attributed to immigration and the descendents of immigrants.”<sup>11</sup>

*Cities are known for their assets.* Cities are abundant with many cultural, recreational, entertainment, and educational institutions. Opportunities to learn through their many colleges, seminars, and conferences are abundant. The range of merchandise is enormous, making it possible to purchase almost anything conceivable. Though large cities are diverse in what they offer, cities are also known for specialization. For example, New York is known as the financial center of the world. Until the more modern era, Los Angeles was known as the entertainment

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., pg. 117.

<sup>8</sup> Audrey Singer, “The Rise of New Immigrant Gateways” [on-line] (Brookings Institute, Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy); available from [www.brookings.edu/urban/](http://www.brookings.edu/urban/); Internet, pg. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Singer, op. cit., 7.

<sup>11</sup> Mark W. Nowak, “Immigration and U.S. Population Growth: An Environmental Perspective,” Negative Population Growth Special Report [on-line] available from [www.npg.org/specialreports/immxuspopgrowth.htm](http://www.npg.org/specialreports/immxuspopgrowth.htm); Internet, pg. 2.

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capital of the world, and not too long ago, Chicago was known as a manufacturing city. Therefore, large cities are abundant in resources that can truly enhance the daily lives of their citizens.

*Cities are known for their problems.* I agree with Charles Lyons, Senior Pastor at Armitage Baptist Church in Chicago when he says, “In the city everything is intensified, magnified, and multiplied.” With tongue in cheek he goes on to say, “Ministering in the city is like tent camping in a hurricane.” This tempest-filled environment is expressed on a daily basis in many ways.

*The problem of stress:* Those who live in large urban areas experience extra stress in day-to-day living. In the larger cities, rush hour traffic has expanded to most of the day, traffic tickets have become a major form of government revenue, there are long lines at government agencies like the Post Office and the Department of Motor Vehicles, and one has to wade through the bureaucracy when dealing with issues such as traffic tickets, property taxes issues, errors in utility bills, city service problems, and accident reports, to name a few.

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Several years ago, the county made a mistake on my property tax bill, charging me double what they should have, based on the assessed value. Since my bank was automatically paying my taxes through escrow withholdings, the big jump in my tax bill was paid without the bank noting the increase. I soon received a notice that because of the increase in property taxes, my house payment would increase by about fifty dollars per month for two years. Since I was an inner city missionary at the time and living on minimal income, I could not afford this increase, so I quickly went downtown to the county tax department and endured a frustrating meeting before finally convincing the clerk that there was, in fact, an error made on my bill. He proceeded to fill out a Declaration of Error assuring me that I would receive a \$1,000.00 refund. Even though the error was obvious, the tax complaint would have to go through the Court of Appeals, which was a two-year process. I did get the refund without, of course, the benefit of interest and only after my family lived through a very stressed budget for the two-year waiting period. During my twenty-nine year tenure in Chicago, I have also gone through similar experiences with the water department, and again with the county when they incorrectly sold a vacant lot I owned to pay for back taxes.

*High cost of living:* In Chicago, apartment rentals run from \$500 to \$5,000 per month. In the neighborhood near our church, assuming you stay off the boulevard, the rent will be between \$800 and \$1,800 per month. The ten most overpriced places to live in 2004 were all cities with a population of 240,055 or more. Among the cities included, Seattle ranked as number one, Chicago as number eight, and New York City ranked as number nine. Below I have included

**Table 2**

<b>Ten Most Overpriced Places In 2004</b>					
City	Job Growth Rank	Income Growth Rank	Cost of Living	Housing Affordability	Median Home Price
Seattle, WA	122	149	132	122	\$282,500
Bergen-Passaic, NJ	110	102	141	131	\$379,400
Miami, FL	79	132	127	137	\$254,900
Portland, OR	118	133	114	105	\$195,100
Middle-sex, NJ	85	131	138	116	\$322,700
San Jose, CA	150	28	149	142	\$585,000
San Francisco, CA	145	27	150	146	\$597,300
Chicago, IL	119	98	123	120	\$228,100
New York, NY	103	63	146	143	\$369,700
Jersey City, NJ	98	101	119	135	N/A

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*According to the article, the rankings in Forbes' Best Places To Do Business are based on a 1 to 150 scale, where 1 is the best and 150 is the worst. A city that ranks 150 for its cost of living, for example, is the absolute worst of all 150 places in the list. (The rankings used in this list were based on data from Economy.com and Sperling's Best Places). The median home prices were taken from the National Association of Realtors' fourth-quarter report on existing family home sales, where the national average was \$170,800. (The median home price in Jersey City was not available, however, and the median home price in San Jose came from the Santa Clara County Association of Realtors). The cities are ranked in the order of the most overpriced to the least overpriced.*

*Deteriorated neighborhoods:* As David Claerbaut states, "Since the housing supply is fixed, this dip will drop prices, which will alarm financial institutions and cause them to cut back on loans. This cutback is called *redlining*. Redlining begins

<sup>12</sup> Betsy Schiffman, "Home Improvement: Most Overpriced Places 2004," *Forbes* [on-line] available from [http://www.forbes.com/lists/2004/08/13/cx\\_bs\\_0813home.html](http://www.forbes.com/lists/2004/08/13/cx_bs_0813home.html); Internet.

**Thompson: The Mother of All Challenges: Constant Change, Enormous Needs, Bu** with bank officials outlining an area that they feel will decline over the next twenty years (the length of many mortgages). As a result of this prediction, the bank chooses not to lend any mortgage money to anyone wishing to purchase land in the redlining area. Though illegal, this practice is used to protect the bank against high-risk lending. What is happening, however, is that the bank, ostensibly a servant of the community, becomes its killer. The result of these redlining practices was that portions of the inner city took on the appearance of a ghost town as the area becomes dotted with burned out, abandoned buildings, surrounded by open space.”<sup>13</sup> Another related problem is the depressing conditions due to the deteriorating property owned by slum landlords who have little concern for their tenants. Some homes in the inner city are not only unpleasant but also unsafe with structural problems and rat infestations.

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*Urban renewal:* Another fact of urban life is gentrification, which leads to urban renewal. I agree with David Claerbaut when he said, “There is always the ever-present fear of urban redevelopment (once called urban renewal) in its various forms, even where housing is adequate. Urban renewal was sardonically viewed as a euphemism for poor-people removal. Redevelopment is no different. What occurs is that a city marks off an area (much the way a bank redlines) and decides to refurbish the neighborhood. However, this refurbishing does not benefit the present inhabitants of the community, as many people believe; rather, the area is ‘cleaned out,’ meaning that the existing buildings are leveled and new construction occurs.”<sup>14</sup> “Sometimes these redevelopment programs have been termed land reclamation. This is a most interesting term. When broken down, it simply states that the land is being reclaimed.”<sup>15</sup> The renewal only helps the property owners, raising the value of property and causing the tax and insurance to also go up, thus forcing rent skyward. The unfortunate result is that the poor people are forced out of their homes to even worse neighborhoods. This is happening in a major way in the neighborhood where I live. The environment is improving because drug traffic and gang activity is decreasing, but because of higher rent, the poor people are forced to move to worse living conditions.

*Housing projects:* Many of the very poor are forced to live in a system of housing projects, which has become a failed sociological experiment. “Today the Chicago Housing Authority operates approximately 40,000 homes and apartments.”<sup>16</sup> These units are often poorly maintained. Imagine coming home

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<sup>13</sup> David Claerbaut, *Urban Ministry in a New Millennium* (Federal Way, WA: World Vision, 2005), 40–41.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>16</sup> David C. Brown and Dana Thomas “Ministering in the Projects,” in *A Heart for the City*, ed. John Fuder. (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 391.

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with your groceries to walk up fifteen flights to your apartment because the  
elevators don't work. This is often the experience of residents who live in urban  
housing projects.

*Single parent homes:* Households with one parent are very common in urban  
areas, especially in the inner city. Other than the absence of a relationship with  
Jesus Christ as Savior, I know of no factor that more clearly and completely  
impairs a person's life in so many ways than the absence of a father. We visited one  
home with five children all fathered by different men, none of whom lived with  
them. The grandmother living in the same home was also sleeping with a boyfriend  
who was not her husband. In the city, especially the inner city, there are few  
examples of good male role models and few examples of good marriages, making  
it hard to develop male leadership.

*Corruption in government:* In large cities there is a problem with corruption in  
government and the police force. Police are often rude and uncivil to youth,  
especially minorities, stopping them and frisking them with no probable cause. My  
two sons as well as my son-in-law have been frisked many times. On one occasion  
they were searched while waiting for the doors to be opened so they could attend a  
Christian youth program. These negative experiences make it hard to teach youth  
to respect civic authorities.

*Gang activity:* There is much gang activity in large cities, especially in the inner  
city. Humboldt Park, one half mile south of Armitage Baptist Church, has been  
designated by a gang expert at the University of Chicago as being the worst gang  
neighborhood in the country. "In the metropolitan Chicago area, an estimated  
100,000 young people are involved in gangs. The largest is the Latin Disciples, with  
about 10,000 members. . . . There are about 120 different gangs in the Chicago  
area."<sup>17</sup> In many neighborhoods in Chicago, residents often hear gunfire outside  
their homes, which is usually gang related.

*Illegal drugs:* Street gangs are actively selling drugs throughout the city. Most  
metropolitan areas, especially in the United States, have a huge illegal drug trade.  
Billions of dollars are spent each year to lessen the drug traffic through legal action  
and education, but even more is made on the street selling these drugs. In Chicago,  
it is possible for young kids ("shortys"), only ten to sixteen years old, to make \$800  
to \$1,000 a week for being a lookout ("spotter") for drug dealers. It is no surprise  
in a community where the unemployment rate is over fifty percent that some would  
seek this type of income. In the inner city, drug trafficking is not conducted with a  
high level of secrecy. Residents often see drug exchanges take place right outside

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<sup>17</sup> Tom Locke "Reaching Youth Involved in Gangs," in *A Heart for the City*, ed. John Fuder. (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 437.

**Thompson: The Mother of All Challenges: Constant Change, Enormous Needs, But their homes.** By using “spotters” and by moving their pickup location every thirty minutes or so, it becomes more challenging for the police to make arrests.

*Poor public education:* Cities often have poor public education with a dropout rate at some high schools as high as seventy-five percent. David Claerbaut suggests some of the reasons for the lack of educational achievement: 1. “The role models of the poor are from the ranks of the unemployed, unskilled, alcoholic, disabled, and criminal. Ironically, the criminal group includes the most affluent of the lot: the three Ps—prostitutes, pimps, and pushers.” 2. “Limited formal education of the parent(s), coupled with the lack of opportunity in general, so that the youth usually has little contact with books.”<sup>18</sup> These children often don’t have the luxury of parents reading to them when they are small to create a hunger and interest in reading. 3. “Bulging classes, filled to the brim with academically needy youngsters, are the rule rather than the exception.” 4. “The condition of the schools and academic materials.”<sup>19</sup> Buildings are old and expensive to maintain, therefore the money is eaten up in maintenance and the large bureaucracy. 5. “Poor education is the result of teacher transience and lack of accountability.”<sup>20</sup> Experienced teachers leave the inner city school for better teaching conditions, leaving the inner city schools with a high percentage of first-year teachers.

*Homelessness:* There is a major homeless problem in every large city. It is estimated that there are between two and three million homeless people in the United States, mostly in large cities.<sup>21</sup> According to the U.S. government, estimates are that 200,000 homeless people are mentally ill, which equals one-third of the homeless population.<sup>22</sup> Some have fallen on hard times, but many simply do not want to live in shelters. They feel they are losing their independence.

How do problems in the city impact the church that is seeking to survive and grow in this hostile environment?

First, there are many transitional communities in large cities. The neighborhood where I have lived for the past twenty-six years was once Jewish, then it changed to Swedish/Danish, then Puerto Rican, and now it is Puerto Rican/African American with a large increase in Yuppie residents. This is a tremendous struggle for the local church to minister in an ever-changing environment with changing cultures, especially when the new culture also has a different language. These new residents don’t feel comfortable in a church that expects them to assimilate into their type of worship and style of ministry.

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<sup>18</sup> Claerbaut, op. cit., 99.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Roger Greenway and Timothy M. Monsma *Cities: Missions' New Frontier* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 183.

<sup>22</sup> James Adair *A New Look at the Old Lighthouse* (Chicago: PGM, 1996), 105.

Second, people in the city are transitory. Many are apartment dwellers often moving from apartment to apartment. Being fluid, they often move out of the church's area, causing the church to lose people, often leaders and teachers. Because of this transitory nature, they need the church and its staff to be a picture of stability.

Third, there are unique problems associated with growth in the large cities. It has been said, "If you don't grow, you die." "Where there is no vision the people perish" (Prov 29:18 KJV). I had a seminary professor who used to say, "It's growth or the grave, expand or expire." In the city it can be said, "If you grow you die." Church growth brings its own set of problems:

- In the inner city, church income is low with a lower percentage of income-producing breadwinners.
- The buildings in most cities are from ninety to one hundred and ten years old.
- There are high remodeling expenses with skilled union labor charging approximately fifty dollars or more per hour.
- Because of the mass migration to the suburbs by the middle class, the city has lost many of its tradesmen, teachers, and leaders. These are the people with the skills desperately needed by a growing church.
- The city naturally has a leadership vacuum, sucking time from the few leaders the church has and dwarfing the potential for quality.
- In the urban church there is a high ratio of parishioners to staff. Because of the extra burden and larger concentration of people, the urban church needs more staff than the average non-city church. The reason the urban church has a lower number of staff is because of a lower rate of giving by its people and thus a lower income, forcing the church to hire fewer staff than churches of the same size in the suburbs. This dilemma raises the rate of burnout of people serving in an urban environment. According to a survey of 1,200 women (who attended the 1994 national convention of the Christian Community Development Association and also women outside the organization engaged in urban ministry), on the greatest challenges or frustrations in urban ministry, 70 percent rated burnout as the most difficult to cope with, rating it from moderately to very significant.<sup>23</sup> At Armitage Baptist Church, we have over 1,000 people attending our morning worship with only about 550 members. By the time people who are attending college

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<sup>23</sup> Maria Garriott "Priscilla's Progeny: American Women in Urban Ministry." *Urban Mission*, September 1996, pg. 25.

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and people who are not really committed are subtracted, about 350

volunteers carry the burden for the total 1,000.

- Most urban churches do not have the luxury of parking facilities. Where do 1,000 people park on Sunday morning when the church is situated in a residential community, and there is one parking lot that will handle twenty cars? People don't go to work and free up parking space on Sunday morning; they sleep in. At Armitage, we were fortunate to get permission from our local police district to park cars on the restricted boulevard Sunday mornings, and we borrow parking from the local bank. We also rent a nearby grade school parking lot about three blocks away from the church, shuttling people by van from remote parking to our building every Sunday morning. A team of parking attendants work outside communicating with two-way radios about available parking spots.
- If you buy a building in the city, it will undoubtedly need rehabbing. Who will do your work? Apartment dwellers know little about remodeling a building, and it will be difficult to hire it done with the typical low income. At Armitage, we have had to bring in scores of construction teams from sister churches throughout the nation to assist us on our rehab projects.
- If your urban church is growing, you are going to run out of space. The cost of property is high in the city. In our area, a house, which would be two or three flats (two or three floors with a family living on each floor), runs between \$200,000 and \$500,000 each. These houses are sitting on a twenty-five or thirty-five-foot-wide parcel of land that runs about one hundred feet deep. To acquire enough land to build on, you would have to purchase three or more houses next to each other and tear them down. Before you begin to build, you would have accumulated at least one and a half million dollars in preparatory expenses.

As you can see, problems in the city are great. However, we have an awesome God who can solve each and every problem, as God stated to Abraham with the question, "Is anything too difficult for the LORD?" (Gen 18:14)

### **a place of unparalleled potential**

For the past one hundred or so years, there has been a massive shift in the population of people groups all over our world. According to the United Nations, in 1900, over 13 percent of the world's population was urban. By the year 2000, the number grew to about 47 percent, with more developed nations at about 76 percent

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Great Commission Research Journal, Vol. 3, Iss. 1 [2021], Art. 3 urban.<sup>24</sup> In 2010, according to the United Nations, 3.49 billion people lived in urban areas. That means as of 2010, 60.6 percent of the world population is now urban.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, after July of 2007, for the first time in history, over half of the world's population became urban. According to current trends, it is estimated that by the year 2030, 60.8 percent of the population of the world will reside in the cities.<sup>26</sup> In 1900 there were only twelve cities in the world with a population of one million or more people. As of 2000, there were 411 cities in the world of more than one million people and forty-one "megacities" defined as cities of five million people or more. In 1950, there was only one city that had more than ten million inhabitants. By 2015, twenty-three cities are projected to hold over ten million people; all but four will be less developed countries.<sup>27</sup> Ray Bakke also wrote that "we will add one billion people to the planet in the next ten years, mostly in Asia and primarily in the cities."<sup>28</sup> What is the influence or power that has caused such a surge in migration to the cities of our world? Without question there are sociological and political reasons for this migration, but the real power behind this massive movement is our sovereign God. In Psalm 24:1 it says, "The earth is the LORD'S, and all it contains." God is the sovereign master and owner of the universe. He is not an absentee God but is actively directing the affairs of mankind. There is one power behind this massive movement of humanity. God is strategically moving the masses of mankind for a fundamental purpose. Most conservative Bible scholars agree that the coming of our Lord is imminent. We believe that the clock is winding down, and that we are in the last years before the return of our Lord. God is passionately seeking those who would follow Him and has commanded us to disciple people from all over the world. Because of the shortness of time, I believe God is flooding people all over the world to our doorsteps, so it will be easier for us to reach them.

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This is not only a foreign phenomenon. As of 1990, more than fifty percent of all Americans lived in thirty-nine metro areas of more than one million.<sup>29</sup> In fact, according to Wikipedia, 81% of the population of North America resided in cities

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<sup>24</sup> Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat. "World Urbanization Prospects: The 2005 Revision." [on-line] available from <http://www.un.org/esa/population/publications/WUP2005/2005wup.htm>; Internet.

<sup>25</sup> United Nations Population Fund. "World Population 2009. Facing a Changing World: Women, Population and Climate." [on-line] available from [http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2009/en/pdf/EN\\_SOWP09.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/swp/2009/en/pdf/EN_SOWP09.pdf), 2010; Internet, pg. 91.

<sup>26</sup> Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat, *World Population Prospects: The 2003 Revision and World Urbanization Prospects*. [on-line] available from <http://esa.un.org/unup>, 2003; Internet.

<sup>27</sup> Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat. *World Population Prospects: The 1999 Revision and World Urbanization Prospects*. [on-line] available from <http://www.un.org/esa/population/pubsarchive/urbanization/urbanization.pdf>; Internet.

<sup>28</sup> Bakke op. cit., *Theology*, 13.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

God is urbanizing His world. Roger Greenway says, “At no time in history has it been more true than now that he who wins the city, wins the world.”<sup>31</sup>

God’s interest in cities is not only a twentieth and twenty-first century certainty. The city is not just a sociological phenomenon or invention of mankind. The city is God’s invention and design. God’s plan for our eternal dwelling place is in a city (Rev 21). Even Abraham recognized that, and it is said, “He was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Heb 11:10).

According to Ray Bakke, “The word city or cities occurs some 1,250 times in the Bible. There are 140 cities listed in the Scriptures. Sodom is mentioned fifty-one times.”<sup>32</sup> When God wanted to reach the Assyrians, He did not just send His prophet to an Assyrian country but sent Jonah to the great city of Nineveh. Jesus had compassion for the city. As He was approaching His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, coming over the hill and seeing the city, He wept (Luke 19:41). His weeping was for the great masses of people who had rejected Him.

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### God’s most effective strategy

Traditionally, missions was referred to as the hinterlands, the rural areas of the world. With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, people began moving to the cities. While the world has been changing in dramatic ways, missionary agencies have only begun to put a priority on reaching urban areas in the past few decades. While the world’s population has been migrating to the cities, missionaries have continued to gravitate to the small towns, especially with church planting efforts in the United States. This change in priority is slow partially because the sending church still conceives “real missionary work” as work in the tribal areas. Fortunately, this view is changing. Ray Bakke stated it well when he said, “Missions is no longer about crossing the oceans, jungles, and deserts, but about crossing the streets of the world’s cities.”<sup>33</sup>

Much can be gained by studying the missionary work described in the New Testament. The greatest example can be found in the life of the Apostle Paul who was well prepared for his mission. Born and raised in the Gentile city of Tarsus, Paul was a Roman citizen. He understood the Greek culture, Roman law, Gentile

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<sup>30</sup> Wikipedia. “Demographics of the United States.” August 2010. Online: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_the_United_States).

<sup>31</sup> Roger Greenway *Apostles to the City* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 11.

<sup>32</sup> Ray Bakke “Foreword” in *A Heart for the City*, ed. John Fuder (Chicago: Moody, 1999), 19.

<sup>33</sup> Bakke, op. cit., *Theology*, 13.

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society, and pagan religions; he therefore knew profoundly the people to whom he  
had been called to minister.<sup>34</sup>

Most of the theology that we have come from the Pauline Epistles. It is time  
that we begin patterning our mission strategy after the strategy that Paul followed.  
As he planned his mission trips, Paul simply plotted the larger cities and moved  
from one to the next, planting churches everywhere he went.

The entire ministry of the Apostle Paul was to the cities. He spent most of his  
second missionary journey in Corinth, the largest city in Greece with 600,000  
people. In his third missionary journey, Paul spent three years in Ephesus, the  
largest city in Asia Minor. Paul went from city to city and spent most of his time in  
the largest metropolitan areas. Apparently his strategy worked. Research shows  
that nearly two-thirds of the population of the Roman Empire were Christians and  
were established in major urban areas.<sup>35</sup>

Why would an all-wise God choose the city as the most effective place for  
missionary work? Cities are best suited for missionary work for several reasons. 39  
First, Christianity spreads better in the city because of the personal openness of  
urban people. People are more open to the gospel in the city because of the rapid  
change that is a part of urban life and the personal turmoil that is part of the  
urban experience. Therefore, evangelism, humanly speaking, is easier in the city.  
Secondly, cities are best suited for missionary work because of cultural influences.  
The city is the place where culture is formed. It is the seat of power for the media,  
education, academia, the arts, and literature. Thus, as the city goes, so goes the  
nation. The third reason cities are so well suited for missionary work is because of  
global connection. The city is the place where many nationalities and ethnic groups  
come together. The spread of the gospel in the city automatically moves  
Christianity into many ethnic people groups and thus into dozens and scores of  
countries. The fourth reason that cities are so well suited for missionary work has  
been taught by missiologists for many years: the first five years of an immigrant's  
migration provides his greatest responsiveness to the gospel. This responsiveness is  
experienced because they have often broken ties with their friends, family, and  
religion in order to come to their new country. That fact often makes them very  
receptive to the gospel.

Charles Lyons describes the city as a center of influence. My synopsis of his  
description is as follows: He begins by describing the city as a giant hilltop. As it  
rains, the water flows down the hill by finding natural channels flowing to the valley

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<sup>34</sup> Robert C. Linthicum "Networking, Hope for the City," *Planting and Growing Urban Churches: From Dream to Reality*, ed.  
Harvie M. Conn. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 167.

<sup>35</sup> Rodney Stark, *Cities of God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 6, 13–14, 60.

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below. Upon these hilltops it rains down all the good, bad, and ugly. For example, small towns don't have the Field Museum of Natural History, the New York Opera, or the Boston Red Socks. Small towns just can't develop and maintain the great cultural and entertainment establishments found in every large city. Where did break dancing come from? Where did rap music, blues, or hip hop come from? They all came from the large cities. Now, in a cornfield in Iowa, little boys can be seen with their jeans hanging down to their knees. If someone in that small town invented a new type of music, it would never get off the ground because the mechanisms—the studios, promoters, and publishers—found in the cities are needed to distribute it.

Satan is a master of spreading his evil works, and the most effective place for Satan to work is in the cities. The reason the city provides such fertile soil for Satan's evil tactics is because of the masses of people and because in the '60s, '70s, and '80s the salt and light left the cities in mass numbers. Satan has a fertile field to accomplish his work through the natural channels of the city, so he can influence the rest of society.

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Where did AIDS expand and spread? It was the cities where it multiplied. It is in the cities where the largest concentrations of gay people reside, and it is also where the largest amount of drug use and dirty needles can be found, spreading the disease. Where did pornography come from? It was manufactured and distributed in the cities. Forty or fifty years ago, it was difficult for most people to get pornography. If a source dealing in this contraband was found, the clerk would go to the back room and discretely bring the pornography out to the buyer. Now it is available in retail establishments in every small town in this country, right out in the open for all to see. In Chicago, where Playboy Enterprise originated, we even have a street named after its founder called Hugh Hefner Drive.

Where did gangs originate? Now small towns all over this nation are complaining about gang problems. Where did illegal drugs originate? When I was a teenager in my medium-sized town, you heard very little about drugs. The drug of choice for my classmates was alcohol. In the large cities, all types of drugs were imported, packaged, and distributed. Today in my hometown, as in most, it is easy to purchase just about whatever drug is desired.

Cities are hilltops of cultural influence, hilltops of political influence, hilltops of satanic influence, and are also hilltops of spiritual influence. As it rains down on the hilltop, the large cities of our world, influence flows down the natural channels to the rest of society. People continually move from the city to the suburbs, thinking they can flee the problems of the city. It is only a matter of time before the influence of the city, the good, bad, and ugly, invade the peaceful environment of small-town America.

to the rest of society. The influence of God can best impact society if it is maximized on these hilltops. In the book of Acts, Luke tells us of Paul's work in Ephesus. According to this passage, Paul began teaching at the school of Tyrannus, which was held at a small outdoor amphitheater where Paul taught daily. Luke said, "This took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). All who lived in Asia heard the gospel, Jews as well as Greeks. What an incredible impact Paul had as the Word of the Lord flowed down the hilltop of Ephesus to all of Asia. Dwight L. Moody said, "Waters run downhill and the highest hills in America are the great cities. If we can stir them we shall stir the whole country."<sup>36</sup>

Why are there so many problems in the city? Why is the city so evil? Early in the history of the world, the city became a refuge from God. When God drove Cain from the land, he built a city as a refuge from God (Gen 4:17). Large cities provide an ideal place for people to flee to as a refuge. People with divergent lifestyles can run and hide because of a natural tolerance the city has toward those who are weak and different. The criminal, the sexual deviant, those who practice alternate lifestyles that are not accepted by society at large, people who choose not to work in the traditional sense but find their livelihood by panhandling, some who are living in cardboard boxes under freeway overpasses, as well as many others are looking for a place of refuge.

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The city provides a culture that seeks to defy God. The city of Babel, for example, was built for human glory instead of God's glory. In Genesis 11:4, it records that the people of Babel said, "Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." The city is a place where we can use human resources to make a name for ourselves. This kind of attitude leads to idolatry of achievement. As a cultural production center, the city is like a magnifying glass, bringing out whatever is in the human heart. Thus the city brings out the best and at the same time the very worst of human nature.

The city is also a place of idolatry, as we see with the city of Babylon. Today, people are drawn to skyscraper temples, worshipping self and money. There is more wealth per capita in large cities than any other place on earth, man worshipping money and self. Cities are also a hotbed of religious cults and false teaching. Since cities breed spiritual seekers, when Christians abandon the cities, the seekers fall into the hands of these false teachers, idols, and heresies.

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<sup>36</sup> Winthrop S. Hudson, *The Great Tradition of the American Churches* (New York: Harper & Roe, 1953), 141.

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If these natural tendencies are added to the lack of Christian influence per capita in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, there is no wonder that the decline of morality along with the massive amount of sin-related problems has increased significantly.

In the '60s, '70s, and '80s, Christians fled the city in massive numbers along with many from the middle class who were flooding to the suburbs. There were many reasons for their exodus. Some claim racial discrimination as the motivator. Some racial prejudice may have been a reason, but the cities have always been filled with ethnic diversity. The primary reason these people left was to seek a better life, the "American dream." They were looking for better education for their children, a safer living environment free from gang activity, drugs, and violence. In many urban centers there was a mass exodus of jobs; many of the factories moved also looking for a more fertile environment as they fled the higher cost of operating in the city. Many companies have even left our country looking for cheap labor. In Chicago, as in other places, the white people left first, followed by middle class African Americans, with the middle class Hispanic population close behind. Today there are large numbers of minority people of almost every kind living in the suburbs around large cities.

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The primary reason so many believers left with the rest of the middle class was so they, too, could chase the American dream. What happens when we lose the preservative? We are left with rot and deterioration. The salt and light left the city, and we are left with the effects. I am convinced that if the body of Christ would have seen the Great Commission as an important part of their purpose for existence, if they had stayed in order to respond to a greater purpose, our cities as well as our country would not be as morally bankrupt as it is today. You would think the command Jesus made in Matthew 6:33 was to seek first the American dream and its benefits, and the kingdom of God will be added to you. "The kingdom of God and his righteousness" is what we are to seek. If we do that, God promises to provide all of our needs (v. 31, 33), and there will be no need to worry (v. 34). The worries of this world are what the Gentiles sought (v. 32), but unfortunately, in our age, this became the idol of many believers as well. We are not called to comfort and prosperity. We are called to a mission, and the mission is better achieved where the masses live. God is urbanizing the world, bringing the world to our doorsteps so we can reach them.

Where are all the people from? They are from every nation and ethnic group in the world. Only a mile northwest of my church in Chicago is a massive Polish community. In fact, Chicago is one of the largest Polish cities of the world, with over 280,000 (840,000 in the greater metropolitan area) people from their mother

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country, second only to Warsaw, Poland. Far more Jewish people live in New York City than in the whole state of Israel. In the greater Chicago area, there are 300,000 people of Jewish descent along with 400,000 Muslims. The Chicagoland area draws 1.5 million Hispanics coming from many Latin American countries, the greatest percentages coming from Mexico and Puerto Rico. Chinese people live en masse in every major city in the United States. “How is it that 80 million Chinese now live outside of China? The Christian church has been struggling to get the gospel into China since the Nestorians traveled the Silk Road in the seventh century.”<sup>37</sup> Now God is putting them in every city in the world. We have about sixty-six nations represented in our city, which is typical of every large city in America. The world has indeed come to our front door.

Imagine hundreds of thousands of people from every nation of the world moving into your neighborhood. The world lands at our doorstep, and Christians flee from the cities in droves, chasing the American dream.

Why aren't more pastors and church planters going to the cities? If fifty percent of the world lives in the cities, shouldn't fifty percent of pastors and missionaries go to the cities? The fact is that we need much more than half of the new pastors and missionaries because of the mass exodus talked about earlier. Unfortunately, we are not seeing large numbers of men moving into the large cities of the world. I have been told that there is a waiting list of men trying to move to southern California, and they are not moving to Los Angeles. The search for pleasure and the world's values has even invaded the pulpits and the seminaries of our country.

We have found it very difficult to recruit pastors and church planters to move to Chicago. “It's too dangerous there!” When I moved to Chicago twenty-nine years ago, I was warned by many friends that I should not take my young family to the inner city of Chicago. It was too dangerous, and the environment was not suited for raising children. In those days, God gave me a response that I have lived by ever since. “The safest place in all the world is in the center of God's will, and the most dangerous place is out of His will.” After twenty-eight years, I can say that God has been faithful. He has protected my family, and the evils of the city have not destroyed or even diminished the growth and spiritual development of my children. My children are adults now, and each one is a committed believer in Jesus Christ, all serving the Lord with their spouses in the city. They have gained an appreciation and love for people of many cultures and understand our mission to reach the masses.

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<sup>37</sup> Bakke, op.cit., *Urban World*, 75, 76.

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I firmly believe that the worst place to raise your children is in a Christian

home where humanism rules and where self and materialism are gods. If you have a home where Christ rules, your children will be okay. Yes, the cost of living is greater in the city, and the income for people in ministry is less. It is time, though, that we put feet to our theology. Is our belief in a good and sovereign God, a God who insures that all things truly do “work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to his purpose?” (Rom 8:28) Is this a belief we live by, or is it just something we teach others? Yes, there are many frustrations and inconveniences in the city. Yes, there is stress and discouragement, but “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that always having all sufficiency in everything, you may have an abundance for every good deed” (2 Cor 9:8).

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As pastors and missionaries look for places to serve, we should consider where the greatest need is and where we can have the greatest impact for the kingdom of God. In Valdosta, Georgia, there is a Southern Baptist church for every 1,800 people. In Denver, Colorado, there is a Baptist church for every 59,000 people. In Dallas, Texas, it seems that there is a Baptist church on every corner. Where are the guys who are being called to the tough places, to the inner cities of our world? I am convinced that it is not a matter of God not calling them; it is more a matter of His servants not listening.

**conclusion**

What was God’s plan to reach the world? In order to win people to Christ and plant churches, Paul didn’t go to a haystack in the countryside. Paul went to the cities, one after another. Paul wrote his Epistles to the churches he had planted in the cities and to the people he disciplined. The New Testament plan was to plant Truth Centers on hilltops, the cities, and allow the truth of God’s Word to flow to the rest of society.

A major missions leader in one of our most prestigious seminaries once told me, “If we don’t follow an ambitious, concerted effort to reach our cities in America, our missions movement will go down the tube.” If half of the people live in the cities of one million or more, then half of our missionaries and church planters must be developed and recruited from these cities. If they aren’t, our missions force will be severely depleted as we are seeing in many fields like that of Mexico City where many of our missionaries are at retirement age with no replacement.

From the hilltops of our world flow all the cultural trends and influences of society. If we can plant thriving New Testament churches in the cities, all of society

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will be impacted. It is in the cities where the people are. It is through the cities that  
we can impact the world. God is bringing the world to our doorsteps, and we must  
cooperate with God's plan while there is still time.

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John Thompson has lived and served in the inner city of Chicago for 29 years. After graduating from Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary, John has served as Program Director with a Chicago Inner City Ministry as well as on pastoral teams in four churches. Since 1998, John has served on the staff of Armitage Baptist Church in Chicago and is currently Pastor of Discipleship. John has also directed the Chicago Armitage Urban Study Experience (CAUSE), providing internships in urban ministry and has served as President of Chicago Hope, a mercy ministry of Armitage Baptist Church. In the past 29 years John has taught in many Christian colleges and seminaries and has served as Adjunct Professor of Urban Ministries at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.