

## *The Practice of Urban Ministry: Urban Evangelism*

Francis M. DuBose

Why urban evangelism? Is not evangelism evangelism? To the extent that we are justified in using any descriptive adjective as a modifier of evangelism, we are justified in using the sociological term *urban* to describe a kind of evangelism. We commonly refer to any number of different kinds of evangelism: personal, mass, student, friendship, cultivative, incarnational, and others, according to such modifying factors as agent, object, form, method, ideology, or context. For example, personal evangelism is not mass evangelism, because a person, not the masses, is the object of the evangelism under consideration. Urban evangelism is contrasted with rural evangelism to emphasize the difference in the social contexts in which the evangelism under consideration is taking place.

### The Social Context of Urban Evangelism

The social worlds of ruralism and urbanism are vastly different. Ruralism is a world of kin-oriented homogeneity where sacral, communal, and traditional values are expressed through communities of personal, primary, and direct relationships. It is a static world of simple stimuli and simple institutional forms. Its spirit is emotional and subjective. Characterized by social integration, solidarity, and stability through occupational uniformity and the unity of residence, work, and play, it is an innately cooperative system where "place" is socially significant and a sense of community is inherent in the social interplay of the human dynamics which revolve around the land.

By bold contrast, urbanism is a world of civic-oriented heterogeneity where secular, rational, and existential values are expressed through structures of impersonal, secondary (associative), and indirect (bureaucratic) relationships. It is a dynamic and mobile world of multiple social stimuli and massive and complex institutional forms. Its spirit is pragmatic and utilitarian. Characterized by social stratification, segmentation, and change through occupational specialization and the separation of residence, work, and play, it is an inherently competitive, though interdependent, system where "place" *per se* is socially insignificant and where a sense of community is achieved through the social interplay of the human dynamics which transcend the land. Thus increasingly in the urban context, community is achieved trans-graphically.

As society has gradually become more urban, it has woven the patterns of ruralism into the fabric of the emerging urbanism. This development has been

due not simply to the fact that old ways die slowly, but to the fact that the ruralism of the past embodied fundamental elements inherent in the nature of human life itself. Therefore, the rural patterns of primary social relationships resulting in homogeneous groups characterize much of the private sphere of urban societies. It is important to understand, however, that these social patterns which characterize the total structure of a rural society are relegated to the private sphere in an urban world and are greatly altered by the impact of the reality of the larger urbanism. The public sphere of urban life to which all normative urbanites must relate in a vital way is heterogeneous and is characterized by associative relationships. Vital communication in the urban context, therefore, must relate both to the public sphere of a heterogeneous mass society and to the private sphere of homogeneous primary groups in that society, no matter how much the latter has been altered by the former.

#### The Theological Basis of Urban Evangelism

Vital communication, the stuff out of which effective evangelism is made, must have a sound theological basis in terms of urban reality. Biblical insight into the nature of urban life is important for the right kind of attitude toward the city. The Bible is both realistic in its recognition of the city's capability for evil and positive in its assessment of the city's potential for good and its value as the context for the work of God. The negative picture of the city created by its association with Cain, Babel, Sodom (Gen. 4, 11, 19), and the great harlot (Rev. 17) confirms this evil capability. The city's potential for good is confirmed in the Bible through such positive pictures as the cities of refuge (Josh. 20), the city as a desirable place (Ps. 104), the city as the place of worship (Ps. 48), the city as the place of God's presence (Ezra 48:35; Isa. 60:14), and the city of God toward which Abraham journeyed and which one day would come from God out of heaven prepared as a bride adorned for her husband (Heb. 11:10; Rev. 21). The annals of apostolic Christianity witness to the significance of the city as the place of God's activity. It was in the city that it all happened: Bethlehem, Nazareth, Capernaum, Jerusalem, Antioch, Thessalonica, Athens, Corinth, Ephesus, Rome.

Building upon this realistic and positive attitude, a theology of urban evangelism must relate the communication of the gospel to the realities of urban life in both the public and private spheres. The gospel must be preached with power and effectiveness to the urban masses, as Jesus did throughout his ministry, as Peter did on the day of Pentecost, and as Paul did on Mars Hill and in other urban contexts. At the same time, the message must be shared on a personal basis, as Jesus did so effectively with Nicodemus, the woman at the well, and many others; and it must be shared within small groups, as the Jerusalem church did so effectively. In this way the Christian message addresses itself, on the one hand, to the massive heterogeneous and impersonal expression of urban public life and, on the other hand, to the personal, primary, homogeneous expressions of urban private life. Consistent with this principle,

urban evangelism must see other characteristics of urban life from this theological perspective. For example, the early church adapted institutionally to the dynamics of urban mobility and through this flexibility effectively evangelized urban communities. Urban conflict was seen not as the enemy it is often permitted to become but as the bridge of God where evangelism crosses culture to make disciples. Urban social change becomes the very occasion for evangelistic break-through: from Jerusalem to Samaria, from Antioch of Syria to the Mediterranean world of Greco-Roman culture. Even secularization—the movement away from the religious ties of the past within the ideological vacuum of urban civic life—became an asset in the contextualization of Christianity in the first century. An effective evangelism for the emerging world of our urban future must view urbanism from this theological perspective. Only as evangelism becomes truly indigenous to urban life can it rightfully be called urban evangelism.

#### The Meaning of Urban Evangelism

In the preceding discussion, we have established the meaning of *urban* and implied the meaning of *evangelism* by linking it with the communication of the gospel. It seems safest to keep evangelism close to the gospel, for the word itself comes from the verbal form of the Greek word for gospel. We can see this relationship by using the transliterated forms in rendering Romans 1:15, 16: "I am ready to "evangelize" (*euaggelizō*) you that are at Rome also. For I am not ashamed of the "evangel" (*euaggelion*) . . ." Certainly, the proclamation or sharing of the gospel—the good news of God's redemption in Christ—is the heart of New Testament evangelism. Good news is for telling, and God's good news is for telling with a view to making a difference. In keeping with the intent of the commissions, the definition may be expanded: Evangelism is the sharing of the gospel with the view to making disciples for Christ (Mk. 16:15; Mt. 28: 19, 20).

Evangelism does not happen in a vacuum, however, and certainly New Testament evangelism, which was urban evangelism, was related vitally and dynamically to the total expression of Christian life and function. So must urban evangelism today be understood and practiced.

#### Types and Methods of Urban Evangelism

The basic type and method of urban evangelism depends upon the human focal point in terms of the object of the evangelistic process.

1. *Personal evangelism* focuses upon persons, and the method is *conversational*. The New Testament, especially in the Gospels, is replete with illustrations of this type and method. Whether it is planned or spontaneous, personal evangelism is especially significant in an urban society where people easily become lost and alienated among the urban masses. It speaks to the hurt of depersonalization.

2. *Group evangelism* focuses usually upon the small group, certainly upon

a manageable group. Its method is *dialogical*. Small group evangelism becomes increasingly significant in an urban society as a means of achieving community in areas where residential community is essentially nonexistent. Thus the importance of "cell" groups is growing in an increasingly urban society. Group evangelism may develop into a friendship, or fellowship, evangelism which has a strong nurturing orientation.

3. *Mass evangelism* focuses upon the masses. Mass evangelism may be directed to a moderately large group, such as a typical evangelistic worship service in a medium-sized church, or it may occur in a much larger group, such as in the service of a large church or in a meeting in a large rented hall or in the open air. The method is *declarative*. Urban society is a mass society characterized by mass communication. It is therefore unthinkable that mass evangelism would be absent from urban evangelism. New Testament evangelism majored on mass evangelism. Mass evangelism must be indigenous, however, with its style and content contextualized, both in terms of urbanism itself and in terms of the unique character of the particular urban setting at hand. Simply to have large meetings is not necessarily mass evangelism in the New Testament sense.

#### The Forms, Structures, and Channels of Urban Evangelism

The basic forms through which urban evangelism was expressed in the New Testament and through which it must be expressed today are those forms which inhere in the nature and function of the Christian life itself. (1) *Preaching* grew out of the New Testament concept of proclamation and was vitally linked with apostolic evangelism. It was dynamic and adaptable to every situation, which the changing urban scene demanded. (2) *Ministry* in the New Testament was the means through which much New Testament evangelism was accomplished. Incarnational evangelism—vital proclamation from the stance of a ministering presence—is an especially relevant form of evangelism for the urban context. (3) *Teaching* went hand in hand with proclamation in the evangelistic life of the early church (Acts 4:2, 5:42). (4) *Fellowship* in the New Testament had a strong evangelistic orientation. The church of Acts 2 was an evangelistic fellowship, and in 1 John 1 evangelism assumes the form of an invitation to fellowship. (5) *Worship*, according to Paul, can be the means of winning converts (1 Cor. 14:24, 25). In fact he spoke of his evangelistic ministry in strong liturgical terms (Rom. 15:15, 16).

These forms assume concrete expression through the contextualized structures of the institutional church. (1) The traditional church facility, the sanctuary, or auditorium, and educational plant, is the basic structure through which most of the above forms of evangelism have transpired traditionally. A vital urban evangelism, however, continually challenges the church toward a more faithful stewardship in the use of the church plant through multiple use, more frequent and relevant use, and the sharing of facilities. (2) The house meeting

concept so integral to early Christianity has been recovered in the wake of the recent urban revolution. With an almost unlimited variety of styles, from the home fellowship to the autonomous house-church congregation, homes are being used in an extremely effective way around the world as a significant structure for evangelism and nurture. (3) The street has always been one of the most flexible structures for evangelism in the city for the simple reason that much vital urban communication takes place on the city street. Though the older street "shouter" commands little audience on the modern street or open square today, other forms of street communication are extremely effective: the musician, the drama group, pantomime, puppets, and others. (4) *Public halls, institutional facilities, and mobile units* have been and continue to be effective structures for urban evangelism, though the style has to be evaluated continually to determine its relevance to the changing urban scene.

As evangelistic forms require effective structures for visibility and actualization, so they require vital channels for illustration, clarification, contextualized communication, encounter opportunity, and the actual means by which persons are confronted with the claims of the gospel upon their lives. Forms are the "what," structures are the "where," and channels are the "how" of the evangelistic process. (1) The *personal-public encounter* is the deliberately structured evangelistic channel—whether it be personal, group, or mass—in which the gospel message is shared verbally. (2) *Normal life situations* of interpersonal and intergroup relations in the daily routines of residential life, work, recreation, school life, and voluntary group associations are basic channels of evangelistic or pre-evangelistic opportunity in the urban context. These ordinary life situations provide some of the best points of contact for fruitful evangelism. (3) *The consciously planned use of proven means of effective communication, relational activities, and ministries* is the other vital channel of effective evangelism. Urban society today offers a plethora of these channels: the media (radio, television), literature (from tracts to books), audio-visuals, education (from the traditional Sunday school to startling new curriculum designs and models), counseling, medicine (and other forms of healing), recreation, retreats, fellowship meals, friendship groups, Christian social ministries, community organizations, and many others.

The choice of the term *channel* rather than *tool* has been deliberate. To be as true as possible to our biblical tradition in urban evangelism today, we must free ourselves from the temptation of gimmickry. A manipulative evangelism, especially in the urban context, is counterproductive, if not damaging. The gospel must be shared through relevant structures and meaningful channels.

#### Target Groups for Urban Evangelism

1. *Persons in need* are the object of all evangelism. The focal point of all evangelistic concern should always be persons and families in need. Selective evangelism, that which caters to racially, socially, and economically desirable

people, is contrary to the spirit of Christianity. God cannot honor this perversion of the evangelistic spirit of the New Testament.

2. *The residential community* is the most obvious target area in evangelism. Despite the breakdown of a sense of community in modern urban residential areas, the residential neighborhood is still a unit of society with common problems, needs, and desires. Making meaningful inroads into the life of a given community offers the very best opportunity to reach people. To address oneself to a specific residential area, rather than striking out after the city at large, is good stewardship. The use of the block plan for personal visitation evangelism followed by group fellowship meetings is an excellent strategy which churches are using effectively today.

3. *Responsive groups* are a high priority. Finding responsive groups is one way of discerning the Holy Spirit's leadership and the open door of evangelistic opportunity. This approach is biblically sound and is good stewardship. The group may be a residential subcultural group. It may be a specialized group, such as students, who do not constitute an actual specific residential community. These responsive groups should be gathered for special Bible study with an evangelistic orientation.

4. *Responsive masses* should be especially noted. In certain areas masses will respond to certain types of gatherings. These responsive masses should be reached by the most meaningful mass structures possible. As emphasized previously, however, these structures must be indigenous if mass meetings are to have maximum effectiveness with satisfying and permanent results.

5. *Homogeneous groups* should also be especially noted. The city is an urban mosaic. Social stratification is a characteristic feature of most modern urban communities. People tend to live in homogeneous pockets: black and brown ghettos, working-class residences, professional suburbs, southern enclaves in northern urban cultures. These subcultural residential communities are the nearest resemblance in modern urban society to the traditional rural, small-town, and urban residential communities of the past. It is wise stewardship to communicate with these people in the natural context of their subcultural situation. Communication often comes more easily in the context of social homogeneity. Small group meetings composed of people with the same subcultural identity, residential or transresidential, will make for excellent communication. This is a useful principle of contextualized communication. It must not become the ultimate and overriding norm of evangelistic strategy, however, for it could work at cross purposes to the gospel, which breaks down the cultural barriers that separate people. The larger and ultimate witness must be cross-cultural.

6. *Other target groups* call for special consideration. Target groups which from time to time might be more responsive than others and therefore the object of special evangelistic consideration are children, youth, single adults,

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the elderly, workers, business groups, students, professional people, artists, entertainers, athletes, migrants, street people, the institutionalized, the disabled, and the disadvantaged.

New Testament urban evangelism was an evangelism of the Spirit. So it must be today. Everything in the evangelistic program may be right, but unless the Holy Spirit breathes upon it, it will not work. Sociological analysis, theological clarity, and methodological soundness must be instruments of God's Spirit, for the Spirit is the agent of evangelism. As the Spirit moved through dedicated channels in the vital urban scene of the apostolic age, so the Spirit can move today. So the Spirit *is* moving today!



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