

Paul

The Urban Strategist — His Message

Probably no one in modern history knows more about cities than the modern scholar, Lewis Mumford. Mumford has studied urban life from every angle: from the ancient origins of the city, to its transformations in the course of time, its contemporary forms and structures, and its prospects for the future.¹ Believing that the world is standing on the brink of chaos and only a global conversion to some vital faith can hold mankind back from the fatal plunge, Mumford pleads for a transformation of urban life. With missionary passion, he urges that people everywhere accept a new plan for their lives, a transformation that is the only alternative to global tragedy. It is unfortunate, however, that the transformation for which Mumford pleads is little more than a faith in some sort of democratic love, a dream that can never be fulfilled through human endeavor. We hear Mumford pleading for his "gospel" in his book, *The Conduct of Life*:

We know that the living places of our planet may be wiped out, and our planet itself denuded of life, through the wholesale misapplication of scientific power unless the change that alters the condition of modern man and the direction of his activities takes

¹ Mumford's most outstanding work about the city is *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Harbinger Books, 1961). It has been translated into many foreign languages and served as the basis of six documentary films by the National Film Board of Canada, "Lewis Mumford on the City," which have been shown throughout the world.

place in much shorter order: almost, as one reckons historic time, within the twinkling of an eye. . . . How can this be done? By looking not for a single transforming agent, but for millions upon millions of them, in every walk of society, in every country: a democratic transformation, dispersed and widespread, to replace those centralized and authoritarian images which would today, under our current nihilism, be either ineffectual or tyrannous. Let us confess it: such a change has never yet taken place in the past. . . . Today each one of us must turn the light of the lantern inward upon himself; and while he stays at his post performing the necessary work of the day, he must direct every habit and act and duty into a new channel: that which will bring about unity and love. Unless each one of us makes this obligation a personal one, the change that must swiftly be brought about cannot be effected. But all of this is beyond historical precedent and probability? Granted. An impossible dream? No. . . . only one thing is needful: faith in the dream itself; for the very ability to dream is the first condition of the dream's realization. And which is better? Think into a nightmare, equally self-fabricated, though we close our eyes to our own constant part in this pathological process—the nightmare of extermination, incineration, and universal death?—or to dream of the alternative processes that will endow individual men and the race at large with a new plan of life? Better the possible self-deception of this dream than the grim fact of that nightmare.²

Mumford's impassioned plea is enough to make you weep when you consider how little hope he offers to modern civilization. He calls for radical, personal conversion on the part of millions of people in all walks of life and in every country of the world. Yet he admits that the solution he offers is irrational and lies beyond all historical precedent and probability. The only conclusion we can draw from it is that there is really no hope for the world's great cities, no alternative to the nightmare which is coming.

² Lewis Mumford, *The Conduct of Life* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), pp. 118-20.

Paul's "New Creatures in Christ Jesus"

Paul's response to urban despair was the message of reconciliation with God through Jesus Christ. "Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come" (II Cor. 5:17, RSV). All this, said Paul, is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and has passed on to us the ministry of reconciliation. The ministry of reconciliation, God in the flesh reconciling the world to himself, was the content of Paul's mission and his message to the urban centers of the Roman world.

Spurred on to a large degree by the fear and despair to which Mumford referred and the longing of mankind for a new social order, many scholars today are demonstrating renewed interest in the biblical concepts of renewal, liberation, restoration, and reconciliation. Often this takes the form of a reinterpretation of the traditional meaning of these terms. We must confess that all too often the church's understanding of biblical concepts has been influenced by self-centered interests. But at the same time we must recognize that in the present situation social ideologies and political concerns are adding a great deal of input as far as modern interpretations of reconciliation are concerned. Liberation theology is foremost in this area.

Young intellectuals, led by Marxists and neo-Marxists, level a great deal of criticism against the church for what they conceive to be the church's self-centeredness and lack of concern. At the same time, Third World nations are asking what Christianity can do to improve their desperate situations. What does the biblical doctrine of reconciliation have to say about peace and social justice? If the apostle Paul were here today, what would his message be concerning urban poverty, injustice, and oppression?

Major changes are occurring in churches' conceptions of their mission and message to the world. There is a shift from personal and experiential understanding of the gospel to communal and social concerns. There is a change from the vertical emphasis in the Christian message to the horizontal. Whereas in the past the horizontal was often neglected, today the vertical is increasingly ignored. We are told that in response to the question "Are you saved?" we should not answer by talking about heaven, but

about this world and the changes we want to bring about here and now.

There is, furthermore, a shift from concern over the church as institution to an emphasis upon the church as part of the world. The new theology tells us that God's concern is not limited to the church, nor is it primarily for the church, but for the world. Christ's kingdom is not church-bound, nor is his kingship limited to the community of his followers. Rather, Christ's kingdom is found wherever men are being liberated, where peace is established, and oppression eliminated. This, in terms of the new theology, is the meaning of *reconciliation*.

The social implications of reconciliation are now of foremost concern. We are told that reconciliation must be *practiced* in the world to be of any value. In this context, conversion is not a change of mind or heart as far as a person's convictions and relationship to God are concerned, but a commitment to join what is understood to be God's program of change for the world. It means commitment to social and political revolution, the elimination of injustice, and the relief of the oppressed.

For those well acquainted with Paul's missionary message all of this sounds strange and unfamiliar. The essential truth of reconciliation as a change in relationship between the sinner and God is missing. According to Paul's writings, man's relationship with God is still basic. If we move away from that, we are left with something other than biblical Christianity. It is certainly true that reconciliation has many practical implications for life, and admittedly the church has not emphasized these as it should. But the primary focus is still *peace with God*, and that is the heart of the Christian message to the city.

Citizenship in the kingdom of heaven is the number one priority in Christian proclamation. Christians have a responsibility in all areas of life, and the implications of reconciliation are far greater than the church generally has realized. Such matters as unjust social structures and the oppression that results from racial prejudice embodied in practices such as apartheid, racial discrimination, and similar wrongs in society, must all engage our attention. They should be objects of our righteous wrath, and their eradication should be a high priority goal of the Christian community. But after acknowledging all this and confessing our past failures to apply the gospel consistently to the wrongs in

society, the truth must be reiterated that reconciliation with God is the heart of the gospel and the fountain from which emerges the direction and motivation for God-honoring social changes. If this truth is lost, then the church really cannot say anything new or important to the world.

Paul's message of reconciliation with God through the person and work of Jesus Christ is seen in his sermon in Antioch (Acts 13:16-41). Paul anchored his message in the Old Testament Scriptures. He began by tracing God's gracious dealings with Israel, leading up to the greatest gift of all, Jesus the Savior (v. 23). Paul appealed to the Hellenistic Jews of the Dispersion to do what the Jews at Jerusalem had failed to do, namely, recognize that Jesus was the Messiah, the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, and believe this word of salvation that Paul preached. There was in Paul's message enthusiasm for his mission and optimism concerning its final outcome. He quoted the prophet Habakkuk, saying, "let scoffers beware, for God is doing a great work in our day which those who perish will not believe even when it is told them" (Acts 13:41).

Paul's preaching at Antioch indicates the pattern of his preaching throughout his missionary career. When his audience was acquainted with the Old Testament, he began on that basis and moved quickly to the good news about Christ. When, as at Athens, his hearers lacked the Old Testament background, he began on the common ground of creation and the "seed of religion" that all men possess. At Athens Paul first dealt with matters such as who God is, how God is related to mankind, what God wants all men to do, and why their response to the message was urgent (Acts 17:22-31). But with Jews and proselytes who knew the Old Testament and accepted its authority, Paul could hasten at once to Christ's death and resurrection as the fulfillment of prophecy and God's way of reconciling sinners to himself.³

³ Paul's sermon at Athens appears to be incomplete. Acts 17:32 suggests that his hearers began to sneer and disrupt his preaching when Paul spoke of the resurrection. Any missionary who has preached on the street or in places where he did not enjoy the benefit of a formal platform, church decor, or a public address system, knows that hostile crowds can easily disrupt an evangelistic address. The only wise course for the evangelist to take is to make an orderly exit and deal privately with those in the audience who are sincerely interested in what he is teaching. This is precisely what Paul did (vv. 33, 34).

There is no way to read Paul's sermons and avoid the conclusion that he believed that apart from the cross and the resurrection there was no reconciliation with God or hope for mankind. This theme flowed through all of Paul's writings as well. Through suffering and death Christ established his power and dominion over all satanic powers (cf. Col. 2:15). His death was a propitiation for all our sins (cf. Rom. 3:25). Preaching and miracles were not enough, for he had to bear the sins of his people (cf. Rom. 5:9; Heb. 9:26-28). Without the shedding of Christ's blood there was no remission of sins (Heb. 9:22). We were reconciled to God through the payment of a price, and the price was Christ's atoning death (cf. I Cor. 6:20; 7:23). The oldest Christian confession, recorded in Paul's own words, points to the heart of the gospel as reconciliation through Christ's atonement: "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried and rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures" (I Cor. 15:3, 4). That was the message Paul preached consistently to the urban world of his day.

If the church loses touch with Paul's doctrine of reconciliation, then it has lost its message for the world, and whatever it may say about social and communal relationships will amount to nothing. When the Christian mission stops talking about God; when it stops talking about Christ, his death, and his resurrection; when it stops calling men to repent from their sins and be reconciled to their Maker, then everything else it says will be valueless.

The Effects of Reconciliation on the World

Each time that a soul finds peace with God, fresh liberating power is released in the world. Through reconciliation a person is released from the bondage of sin and death and set free *in the world* to live a new and transformed life. Reconciliation is from above, and it has far-reaching effects here on earth. It is all by grace, not works; of God, not man. And at the same time it affects every human relationship, every activity, and every level of society.

For too long Christians have concentrated on the individual and personal dimensions of reconciliation while neglecting the social implications. If we mean what we say about Christ's lordship over all of life, we must be willing to carry his banner into all

of life. Christ's lordship should be the focus of supreme allegiance for the reconciled. This means that Christians should judge everything by a new standard: the criterion of God's Word. Social institutions, economic systems, and traditions of all kinds come under the scrutiny of Christ's standard. This was the thrust of Paul's whole message as he proclaimed the gospel of reconciliation to individuals living in a sin-ridden society. He expected that message to eventually permeate every aspect of Roman life.

Too many Christians today have lost their faith in the power of the gospel. They forget that the future belongs not to the devil but to the Lord. The world is not consciously waiting for Christ's coming but is nonetheless struggling for justice and peace, which only Christ can give. This underscores the truth of what Paul wrote in Romans 8, where he spoke of the "birth pangs" of creation, longing for the new order that Christ would someday establish. To this day God continues to write in men's hearts (Rom. 2:15), and this stirs men to keep raising moral and religious questions and seek a better world. Mankind is restlessly waiting for a just society to be built. Yet men fail to build it because they themselves can only attempt change by law, by revolution, or as Mumford suggests, by dreaming. The rule of men inevitably fails, laws never issue in what is desired, and dreams evaporate.

Renewal and reconciliation come from God alone, by grace, through Christ. Christ alone offers the solid foundation of hope for a transformed world, reconciled people, justice, and peace. The future is God's, and his reconciling purpose will be accomplished. In the end there will be one kingdom, and that will be Christ's. It takes faith to believe that, but once accepted it gives meaning to whatever else is required along the way.

Paul's message is basic to our understanding of and engagement in urban mission. There is a loss of confidence today in the simple message of the gospel. Sincere Christians are being led to believe that sophisticated urbanites need something new, something more glamorous or more relevant to their needs than the doctrine of reconciliation with God through faith in Christ Jesus. "Need" is being defined in a purely humanistic and materialistic manner, and the need for justification and reconciliation with God are left out of the picture. This subtle shift away from the biblical message explains to a large extent why Protestant churches in general have been ineffectual in the city.

Paul knew he had something to say to the cities which he visited. His message came from God, and Paul saw himself as its messenger. Secular and radical theologians today are wrestling with real problems, and they describe their wrestlings passionately and convincingly in many books. Unfortunately, some of them have drawn the conclusion that we really have no divine and authoritative message for urban man. We must identify with him, sit with him in his misery, and let him talk to us. But there is little that we can say to him, and trying to "convert" him to our own religious position is out of place.

The contemporary urban world needs to be studied and understood by those whom God has called to be communicators of his Word. Too often evangelical missionaries have preached to the air because their feet were not on the ground. They did not understand the people to whom they spoke. But it is the tragedy of tragedies to lose one's grasp on the historic, biblical gospel, which is reconciliation with God through conversion to Jesus Christ. Paul never confused contemporary needs with eternal priorities, and neither should we.

Paul Versus Marx on How to Produce the "New Man"

Paul's fundamental message to the urban world of the first century has another application to one of the burning questions facing us today. Around the world, Marxism and Christianity are pitted against each other, ideologically and practically. They are based on opposite principles, the one being materialistic and the other theistic. They aim to lead men in opposite directions, the one toward a society ruled by human power and reason and the other toward the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Some Christians believe that Christians and Marxists can cooperate fruitfully in accomplishing certain short-range goals. I would challenge this position, because I believe that any such cooperation between people of opposing loyalties beclouds the fundamental issues that separate them and proves to be a stumbling block to those who do not perceive the underlying differences.

The issue which is a basic dividing line between the message of Paul and the teaching of Karl Marx has to do with how the "new man" is produced. Paul moved about the world of his day—a world filled with injustice, oppression, and corruption of all kinds—preaching a way out of the mire for people and the society

they had produced by means of spiritual new birth. "If any man is in Christ," wrote Paul, "he is a new creature. Old things are passed away, and everything is become new" (II Cor. 5:17).

Marxists also talk about new people and the importance of producing them. They recognize that the Marxist's ultimate goal of the ideal society cannot be attained until man himself is changed. Already in 1843, Feuerbach, the famous critic of religion, was writing to Karl Marx, "We need new men!" He realized that the old ones could not be relied upon to bring about brotherhood and create a new society, and that merely to set men free is no guarantee that they would become better. Political emancipation by itself has not brought about brotherhood or put an end to selfishness. Man himself must be changed, and therein lies the problem.

How can the new man be produced? This question lies at the heart of the conflict between Christianity and Marxism. The fundamental antagonism between Christianity and Marxism does not lie in the formal description of the ideal man so much as in the choice of the road that must be taken to produce this new kind of creature. According to Marxist theory, the new man must be produced by man himself, through re-education and the re-ordering of social structures. The Bible, on the other hand, teaches that only God can create new people. Liberation from self-worship or any other form of idolatry is a gift from God, and it is something which God alone can perform.

Communist literature in recent years brings to light some of the frustration felt by communists in regard to the problem of creating the new man. The creation of the new man is recognized as the most difficult task in the communist transformation of society, for without it the communist ideal of a world in which people will perform their duties voluntarily, unselfishly, in perfect harmony with each other, and for the common good, cannot be achieved. It is gradually recognized that political and economic revolutions in themselves cannot produce a situation in which the birth of the unselfish man takes place automatically. Evil, or "the weed" as one writer calls it, cannot be eradicated so easily. The lust to possess, to dominate, and even to destroy for selfish purposes, is part of the human make-up, and revolutionary changes in politics and economics do not make it disappear. Instead of eradicating evil, the totalitarian state upon which the

implementation of communism depends tends to grow stronger and more unbearable because its powers and authority are so much greater. It finally produces a soulless bureaucracy, which completely regimented human life and tolerates no opposition.

Paul's approach to how the new man is produced stands in sharp contrast to Marxist theory. Paul was a preacher, not a political or social revolutionary. He believed that the new humanity would be produced by God's grace in men's hearts through the Holy Spirit, and that the verbal proclamation of the gospel was the principal means God chose to use to accomplish this change. In Christianity, transformation takes place first on the *inside*, and then, through obedience to God and the work of the Spirit, brotherhood and reconciliation between individuals and classes are produced. This fundamental presupposition, which is a matter of faith, spells the difference between the Pauline approach to urban renewal and all Marxist-humanist strategies.

At the same time it must be said that the only way Christians can show that the gospel does indeed produce fruits offering hope to a distressed world is by living the kind of life that Paul taught his converts in the first century. In a time when so many are searching desperately for a way out of social and economic morass, heavy responsibility rests upon Christians to adorn their message with the credible witness of their lives. Until the texture of our lives bears the stamp of Christ's righteousness, the world will not believe that Christians really make a difference.

Paul

The Urban Strategist—His Method

On a warm night in July, 1977, the lights suddenly went out in five boroughs of New York City. Within seconds the sounds of bricks and stones could be heard smashing store windows as looters ravaged stores, fought one another for choice pieces of merchandise, and hauled home as much as they could steal and carry away.

The behavior of New York's looters shocked the nation. For it was not, as some commentators first tried to make out, that these people were hungry and needed food to live. Most of the looters had full-time jobs. Of the 145 Brooklyn stores which they looted, only 12 were supermarkets, grocery stores, or butcher shops. The rest included 39 furniture stores, 21 appliance stores, 20 pharmacies, 17 jewelry stores, 10 clothing stores, 8 shoe stores, 7 liquor stores, 7 department or variety stores, and 4 auto supply stores. These were not hungry people craving for food, but ordinary inhabitants of the nation's largest city suddenly given the chance to take what was not theirs, to break down and destroy the property of others, and to get away with it under the cover of city-wide darkness.

One columnist, Ella Mary Sims, had this to say about the looting:

The whole picture of thousands of people stealing—and so quickly after the lights were out—speaks of an attitude of violence that is never far beneath the surface of our lives. We may not think of stealing, looting and burning as being violent, but in New York if the

pressure had been applied by store owners or merchants, some of those who were stealing could very well be murderers today.

*The sickness of New York in the dark is a gripping fact of life throughout the world. As of now, none of us knows the cause or the cure.*¹

No sensible person would minimize the complexity of urban problems or pretend that one simple solution, even a profoundly religious one, would make all the problems disappear overnight. The "sickness of New York," to use Ella Mary Sims's expression, is terrifying, and not least of all because it is essentially the same throughout the world. But where we disagree with Ms. Sims is with her conclusion that "none of us knows the cause or the cure." The Bible tells us what the cause is and where the cure must be found. The cause, as Jonah informed Nineveh, lies in the sinfulness of the people, and the cure is through Jesus Christ as revealed in the gospel. At this crucial point in their analysis of the city and its problems, Christians part company with secularists.

How does the person who senses God's call to minister in Christ's name to city people formulate his approach? What kind of missionary strategy has any hope of success against such odds? The city contains so many wrongs which need to be rectified and so many people without Christ that the first temptation is to give up in despair because the job is too big. The second temptation, equally dangerous, is to forget the essentials, confuse priorities, and lavish all one's resources on commendable activities that are not of primary importance.

Scripture does not bind us to one particular missionary methodology, for the New Testament itself reveals a variety of approaches and emphases. Moreover, there are available to us today a vast variety of evangelistic media, products of modern technology of which the early apostles never dreamed but which God in his providence has provided and expects us to use to the best of our ability to spread the gospel.

But are there not certain basic elements in apostolic missionary strategy which are transcendent and might help us in our approach to today's cities? I am convinced that there are. Paul's strategy in the cities of the Roman Empire can and should guide

¹ *The Grand Rapids Press*, 30 July 1977, italics mine.

us today, for his strategy rested on biblical teachings that are as authoritative and practical today as they were then.

The Conversion of Sinners

The lines of Paul's urban strategy ran from converts, to churches, to the whole Roman society—its governments, institutions, and religions. Paul moved out into the highly urbanized Roman world of his day with a definite strategy in mind. He had confidence regarding the essentials of his message and method. Some doors might remain closed and frustrations and rejection might come, but Paul knew what a missionary was supposed to do. He had a strategy based on biblical presuppositions concerning man's sin and God's salvation.

Paul's missionary strategy was built on the bedrock of personal repentance and conversion. His own experience of conversion served to remind him of the absolute necessity for radical spiritual change. In his earlier life Paul had had religion, morality, zeal, and social status (Phil. 3:4-6). But none of these, nor all of them combined, had been able to give him peace with God. He needed to be converted to Christ at a definite time and place, and until that occurred nothing really mattered (cf. Phil. 3:7-9).

To Paul, being "in" or "outside" of Christ was an absolute and all-important difference. That truth must be emphasized because religious universalism blurs the basic distinction. It was not any easier for Paul than it is for us to insist that Christianity demands a clear-cut break with all other religious commitments and a radical moral change in the lives of its adherents. The spirit of Hellenism did not favor such absolutizing of one religion over another. Hellenistic man had a convenient way of separating what a person believed from the way he worshiped and personal ethics from whatever a person might think about God. But Paul came preaching the necessity of conversion and total commitment to the Lord Jesus. He insisted that the sovereign God of the Scriptures required an entire realignment of heart and action.

The first touchstone of an authentic urban strategy is: Are people confronted with the saviorhood and lordship of Christ and urged to surrender their hearts and lives to him? Urban evangelism has had more than its share of easy "decisionism," and it has left the city unchanged and unimpressed. The exigen-

cies of city life allow neither a wishy-washy presentation of the Christian faith and life nor a sidestepping of the necessity of personal conversion. Cities need renewal, and on this we all agree. But let nobody be so foolish as to think that we can begin anywhere else than where Paul began, with radically changed people, converted in their hearts to serving God in the midst of the city.

The Establishment of Churches

The second key element in Paul's urban strategy was the establishment of churches. Paul was never satisfied with simply bringing individuals to Christ. He organized churches wherever he could, and the incorporation of believers into permanent Christian communities was basic to his entire approach to the city.

Obviously Paul maintained a very high view of the church and its divinely instituted structure, and he was committed to its growth and expansion. Formerly he had been a persecutor of the church, but Christ Jesus himself had stopped all that when he revealed himself on the road to Damascus and said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting." That experience settled a number of things for Paul. He knew from that moment on who Jesus was, and what the church was. The church in some mysterious way was nothing less than the body of Christ, and what was done to the church was done to Christ.

Within a few days of his conversion Paul was actively advancing the gospel and promoting the local Christian community at Damascus. By revelation he had come to understand that the church was the long-awaited messianic community, the bearer of the gospel to all races and nations. It was through the church that God would now fulfill his redemptive purpose for the world.

That insight made Paul a church planter. Since God in Christ was carrying out his long-awaited redemptive work in the world through the instrumentality of the church, Paul knew that the expansion of the church was a matter of highest priority. Evangelism therefore meant proclaiming the gospel and gathering believers into visible, organized congregations. If he could not stay long enough to complete the work of appointing elders himself, he delegated the responsibility to one of his coworkers (cf. Titus 1:5). For Paul, the work was not completed until a

visible, organized church was established as an abiding witness to the city.

Paul's church-planting strategy differs considerably from much of what goes by the name of urban mission in our time. In conservative circles, urban mission generally does not go much beyond the skid-row rescue mission strategy or the city-wide evangelistic campaign. Sometimes the mass media, such as radio and television, are substituted for person-to-person contact. In more liberal churches, urban mission has come to mean heavy involvement in race relations, efforts to improve lower-class housing, and social services of various kinds. These in themselves may be legitimate forms of Christian service, and their testimony may at times lead people to inquire about Christ and the love that motivates such service. But if these activities stand alone, they are incomplete. The gospel needs to be verbalized as well as actualized, and the will of God that believers be brought together into living cells of the body of Christ called churches must not be left out of urban mission.

On numerous occasions in the New Testament we find mention made of "the church in your house" (Rom. 16:5; I Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15, and similar references). We know that for two centuries Christians did not erect special edifices in which to worship God but used private homes, rented quarters, or whatever might be available for their gatherings. In Rome as well as in other cities of the Empire, groups of believers met in scattered places throughout the city. When Paul said to the Ephesian elders that he had taught them the whole counsel of God "publicly and from house to house," he was probably referring to his visits not simply to individual families but to the homes where groups of believers gathered regularly for worship and instruction. Today we often call these gatherings "house churches." There are thousands of such groups in Third World cities, and they are a growing phenomenon in Western cities as well. In one city in the Netherlands, where declining attendance at Protestant churches prompted a city-wide religious survey, it was discovered that more than 300 weekly gatherings were being held in private homes and rented quarters. Sometimes the venue is in an apartment building, or a store-front. It may even be in the open air on a vacant lot, as happens occasionally in poor barrios of Third World cities. But regardless of where it is held, the meeting

consists of Christians and inquirers gathering to hear God's Word, sing his praise, build up one another, and witness to the unsaved.

Cell groups and neighborhood churches have a far greater potential for evangelistic growth than do the big downtown churches upon which some people try to depend for urban penetration. Instead of concentrating on big cathedral-like churches which try to serve the city from a few central locations, today's situation calls for a return to the multi-locational strategy of the early Christians. On this subject Paulus Scharpff has written:

"The one and only way to genuine fellowship is the creation of truly Christian cell-groups in the midst of the aridity of modern life; it is the indirect way to mutual reconstruction, to united witness, and outside service" (H. Kraemer).

An evangelistic cell-group is a fellowship of pastoral care in which members first minister spiritually to one another before they unite in an outside witness. . . .

Evangelistic cell-groups are a special means for cultivating the gifts of grace, for they are the best spiritual organisms available to the church of Jesus Christ. They are necessary so long as we are people of flesh and blood, and so long as the law of nature obtains that all organic life grows from small cells.²

Witnessing to Christ's Lordship in Society and the World

Paul's strategy for mission moved from converts to churches, from churches to the city as a whole, and from there to the entire known world. He intended that the leaven of the gospel be felt everywhere. In *The City of God*, Augustine beautifully depicts this process:

After the community or City comes the whole earth, wherein is placed the third stage of human society, which begins from the household, then extends to the city, and finally to the world (XIX, 7).

Jesus Christ is the ascended Lord, and that lordship means sovereignty over nations and their leaders and the world in all its

² Paulus Scharpff, *History of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), pp. 339, 341.

complexity, as well as over the redemptive community of the church. For the nations are now the exalted Son's inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth his rightful possession (Ps. 2:8).

There is a breadth in Paul's perspective that has often gone unnoticed in evangelical circles, and this probably explains the narrow and individualistic approach of many traditional missionary strategies. The people whom Paul led to Christ and the churches that he organized were intended to be a leaven in society, models of righteousness, and signs of Christ's kingdom. His insistence that church leaders be men of exemplary behavior and the attention he paid to disciplinary matters were motivated from two sides. Internally, Paul was concerned that the church be pure and unspotted by the world, like a virgin bride awaiting her husband. Externally, the church was a sign to the world of God's transforming grace, a living symbol of Christ's kingdom and his lordship among men. For Paul, Christ's lordship was here-and-now as well as future. It affected the Christian's whole approach to life and the world. No area was to be excluded. New life in Christ meant living under God's sovereignty, according to his Word, as sons and daughters of the King. In Paul's strategy, the leaven of the kingdom entered society through the changed lives of converted people and the churches which they composed.

The early Christians have been rightly called the "reforming party" of the Roman Empire.³ They came mainly from the lower classes and knew from experience the bitterness of poverty, slavery, and all the oppressive factors inherent in Roman society. They did not call for violence or the radical overthrow of government. But they did bring about change, often paying with their own blood the price for their convictions. They did this because Paul and the other apostles had laid the basic foundation of the church in the Word of God, which everywhere and always challenges evil, oppression, and injustice.

It is instructive to note that Friedrich Engels, collaborator with Karl Marx on the *Communist Manifesto* and chief propagandist for Marx's ideas through the editing and publication of Marx's writings, devoted considerable attention to the origins and development of the Christian religion and took special note of the social

³ William M. Ramsay, *The Cities of St. Paul: Their Influence on His Life and Thought* (1907; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960), pp. 72-75.

consciousness of early Christians. Engels drew four parallels between the early Christian movement and the modern working-class movement: both originated among poor and oppressed people; both proclaimed a message of salvation from bondage and hope for the oppressed; both were persecuted, discriminated against, and despised by the powerful and privileged; and both forged irresistibly ahead despite all these difficulties.⁴

Most of us will reject Engels's way of interpreting history in terms of the class struggle, and we consider his assessment of what actually occurred in the first century as sadly deficient respecting the most important element of all, namely, the vertical dimension of the power and providence of God. Engels chose to see only the socio-economic factors and interpreted the historical events exclusively in terms of the struggle between the privileged and the oppressed. Absent from his analysis is what Luke referred to in his description of the growth of the Christian movement: "And day by day the Lord added to their number those whom he was saving" (Acts 2:47). But having said this, it must also be added that Engels, better than many modern evangelical Christians, recognized the socially revolutionary character of early Christianity. As the early Christians were instructed by the Word of God, they became increasingly aware of the basic issues at stake and the intrinsic differences between their faith in God and the false idolatries of the Roman Empire. Full perception of the deep spiritual issues involved did not occur overnight, nor did the answers come at once. But gradually the false gods of Rome were identified, the battle joined, and the idols began to fall. Faith in action, rather than the barren economic determinism by which Marx and Engels explain history, prompted the conflicts and the changes that occurred.

People who possess a vision of the lordship of Christ and the kingdom which he established constitute the hope of modern cities. For that reason it is so important that from cathedral pulpits to humble shanty churches the full gospel of Christ the Savior and Lord be announced. *The degree of a convert's transformation and the impact on society which a church can make are in direct*

⁴ *Marx and Engels on Religion* (Moscow: Foreign Language Publishing House, 1957), pp. 313-43. Cited in José Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 132.

proportion to the breadth of the gospel they hear. If city pulpits would universally proclaim the comprehensive biblical message of Christ crucified, risen, exalted, and reigning, people would be converted in greater number and urban society would feel the impact. Bible-directed Christians perceive the issues, know where the battle lines should be drawn, and understand the demonic nature of urban idolatry. They realize that the gospel is intended to be more than a personal and private affair. It is also meant for the marketplace, the chambers of government, the schools, and the courts of the land. Millions are seeking that kind of faith, and it is the duty of the church to proclaim it verbally and concretely.

Paul's Method at Ephesus

The New Testament provides a detailed account of Paul's strategy for the evangelization of the city of Ephesus and its surrounding area. Books on missions commonly refer to various facets of Paul's work in this city, but I have never seen his entire involvement at Ephesus viewed in a broad and comprehensive way as a model for urban evangelism. That is how I would like to look at it now.

Five stages are evident in Paul's approach to Ephesus. His initial contact with the city is recorded in Acts 18 (RSV). Paul had just completed more than a year and a half of "teaching the word of God" in the city of Corinth (v. 11), and he was hastening to get back to Antioch of Syria with the report of his second missionary journey. He was accompanied up to this point by his friends and converts, Priscilla and Aquila.

Paul's method at Ephesus was to make a contact at the local synagogue and plant the seed of the gospel among the local Jews. Some seemed receptive and urged him to stay longer. But Paul did not have time just then, and he could only promise that he would return "if God wills" (v. 21).

Initial contacts of a similar nature are available in abundance in many parts of today's world. Evangelical radio and television programs, literature, correspondence courses, Bible distribution, and mass evangelism campaigns have laid the groundwork and now await the follow-up. There is no shortage of initial contacts. What is needed is a better missionary strategy for following

through on these contacts to lead inquirers to become disciples and to establish churches among them.

The second stage in the Ephesus strategy did not involve Paul directly. It involved Priscilla and Aquila, whom Paul had left at Ephesus (v. 19), possibly for the purpose of establishing a Christian beachhead in that city. A powerful preacher named Apollos came to Ephesus and began to announce the gospel of Jesus Christ in the Jewish synagogue. Luke's account indicates that Apollos was not only eloquent as a speaker and fervent in the presentation of his message, but he was well-versed in the Bible and dared to refute the Jews publicly, "proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ" (vv. 24-28). But Apollos also had certain shortcomings. When Paul's friends, Priscilla and Aquila, heard Apollos speak, they realized that his doctrinal understanding needed some straightening out. Without doubt he preached Jesus Christ, but his knowledge was incomplete and he needed further instruction. The lay couple, Priscilla and Aquila, took care of this, with the result that Apollos's zeal and fervency were then balanced by doctrinal knowledge, and his ministry was accordingly enriched.

Apollos did not stay long in Ephesus. He soon expressed the desire to cross the sea westward to continue his ministry in Achaia. By then there was a nucleus of believers in Ephesus, for Luke wrote that "the brethren encouraged him" and wrote the disciples in Achaia (probably in the city of Corinth) that they should welcome him (v. 27). When Apollos arrived, he repeated the kind of sincere and earnest ministry that he had had in Ephesus, with the result that the Corinthian Christians also were strengthened in the faith (vv. 27, 28).

One of the significant characteristics of today's world is that everywhere in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and also in North America, God is raising up thousands of homespun indigenous leaders like Apollos. They are men and women who are zealous about personal witnessing. They are fervent in preaching, and unfortunately, they are often inaccurate on a number of points of doctrine. Such people are not known for their prolonged ministry in any one place, which is good since they lack the qualifications for in-depth teaching and organization. But regardless of their weaknesses, they are key people as far as the spread of the gospel is concerned. Their zeal for evangelism is unrivaled among

"organization" people. They demonstrate great courage in carrying the gospel into difficult areas and are not ashamed to speak out for Christ when all they can expect is opposition, scorn, and mistreatment.

These are the "evangelists" about whom Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:11, describing them as being among Christ's precious gifts to his church. Evangelists have a special endowment from the Lord that enables them to explain the gospel in clear and effective ways to unsaved people. When they preach or testify, Jesus Christ is lifted up winsomely and powerfully, and the Holy Spirit performs the miracle of new birth and conversion. When evangelists like Apollos are not around, churches grow very slowly. But when they are present, things happen! They may require certain "straightening out" at times, because precision of expression, doctrinal details, and organizational procedures are not their strong points. But only those people who are blind to evangelism will minimize the importance of evangelists. They are key instruments in God's hands for the spread of the gospel and the building of the church. At Ephesus, Apollos was an important link between Paul's initial contact and his deeper and prolonged ministry later on.

The third stage in Paul's involvement at Ephesus is described in Acts 19. It was a ministry which he shared with Timothy, his assistant. Paul's goal upon his return to Ephesus was to evangelize in such a way that a church could be organized. Through that nucleus of believers the city and the region beyond it would be penetrated by the gospel. Paul did not have to wait very long before seeing this goal accomplished. Acts 19:9-10 tells us: ". . . He [Paul] took the disciples with him and had discussions daily. . . . This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (NIV).

The steps Paul took in pursuit of this goal included first of all correcting the faith and expanding the spiritual knowledge of the disciples who were already there. Paul found that he had to introduce them to the person and work of the Holy Spirit, about whom they had not been instructed. The result was that the "Ephesian Pentecost" occurred and the believers "spoke in tongues and prophesied" (Acts 19:6). The circle of believers at that time consisted of about twelve men in all (Acts 19:7).

The synagogue, comprised of Jews and Gentile proselytes (as the synagogues of the Dispersion generally were), was the natural religious bridge into the city, and Paul made full use of it. In the synagogue were people who knew the Old Testament and its prophecies concerning the Messiah and the New Age that he would usher in. Many of them were bilingual and bicultural. They had contacts in key places throughout the city and empire. Though eventually it became necessary for Paul to withdraw from the synagogue because of the opposition of the gospel rejectors, he used this contact for as long as the door remained open. When Paul left the synagogue he took the disciples with him and transferred his center of operation to the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This place then became his "pulpit" to the city, and daily for two years he carried on discussions with a view to leading men to discipleship.

During this time signs and miracles began to accompany Paul's ministry. Ephesus was a center of occult worship and practice. Demonic powers were not merely the result of superstitious fear; they were real and exercised a terrible control over men's lives. Those powers were now challenged by a name more powerful than any Ephesus had ever heard before: the name of the Lord Jesus, by which evil spirits were cast out and populations made to tremble (Acts 19:13, 17). By signs and miracles, the divine origin of Paul's ministry was authenticated. There is no evidence that miracles of this kind were a continuing mark of the church's life or even of Timothy's ministry at a later date. But unquestionably, the extraordinary signs that accompanied Paul's work at Ephesus added tremendous impetus to the spread of the gospel.

Paul's residency was cut short by a riot, and Timothy was later required to complete what Paul had begun. Paul could look back on his work at Ephesus, as he did in his farewell speech recorded in Acts 20, and say that in his heart he felt that he was innocent of the blood of all men, for he had performed his ministry faithfully, declaring to them publicly and from house to house all that they needed to know: the whole counsel of God and the gospel of the kingdom. Through his ministry Paul had trained local leaders into whose hands he could entrust the care of the flock. These were appointed as "overseers" and "shepherds of the church of God" (Acts 20:28, NIV). Their appointment was from the Holy Spirit, witnessed to by the laying on of hands (Acts

20:28; I Tim. 5:22). Their training came through Paul's ministry and that of Timothy, which followed.

What Paul found at Ephesus is not uncommon in many places today. In our ministry in Latin America, for example, we regularly receive appeals from small, young congregations that have sprung up through mass evangelism and the work of untrained, independent evangelists. In visiting these groups we find that there is often confusion concerning the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Occultism is also a problem, for most of the believers come from backgrounds filled with superstition, and spiritism is practiced all around them. The goddess of Ephesus was named Diana, and Latin America has virtually made a goddess of the Virgin Mary. There was violence against the young church in Ephesus, and there are places today where Christians are experiencing subtle forms of oppression (and some that are not so subtle) because they acknowledge the Lord Jesus.

What is needed is a mobile missionary ministry that would send men and women to serve as instructors and organizers of such groups so that they could come to know and believe the true faith and form viable churches. Missionary residency in most cases would not be longer than two to four years. Emphasis would fall on teaching the Word of God, correcting errors, and training responsible disciples so that the church could carry on after the missionary has left.

The following quotation from a letter written by Arnold Rumph, a Christian Reformed missionary to Puerto Rico, illustrates how this method might be applied to a concrete situation. In this letter, Rumph reports a trip that he had made to the neighboring nation of the Dominican Republic after he had learned that a group of believers was in the process of organizing what they called a "Christian Reformed Church."

A few weeks ago I visited a group of believers in the Dominican Republic. I came in contact with them by means of the follow-up correspondence of *La Hora de la Reforma* (our denominational broadcast, *The Back to God Hour*). It's a group that has some Pentecostal leanings but no relationship with any existing denomination.

The people are extremely poor. The pastor and the men of the congregation with whom I spent several hours told me that they were very impressed by the radio broadcast and wanted to identify their church

with the denomination which sponsored the broadcast. So, on the Sunday before my arrival, they put up a signboard in front of their humble church building: "La Iglesia Cristiana Reformada."

My first visit with this church was an unforgettable experience. The Sunday morning service began at 9:30 and lasted until 12:15 p.m. A total of twenty-one people were present. There were two children, six women and thirteen men. At their request I preached and explained to them the basic doctrines of the Christian Church. They know and believe the essentials, without a doubt. But there is an awful lot that still needs to be taught, and some things must be corrected.

I was particularly impressed by the fact that there were so many men in the service in comparison to the number of women and children. It appears that the group has about fifty-five members and sympathizers, but on that particular day many could not attend because they had to work in the sugar cane.

What do they want from us? Basically, teaching. They have a pastor, but he never had any training and can hardly read. He's a man of two books, his Bible and his hymnbook. I preached for an hour and they begged for more. That shows how hungry they are for instruction. There are a number of reasons why this group has stuck together and not drifted off to some other denomination. Most of them owe their religious experience to the pastor who was the first to be converted and began witnessing to his family and co-workers in the sugar cane. They follow him as their leader but they know they need instruction beyond what he can give.

I taught them what I could on this first visit and promised to send them biblical material which they could use in their weekly Bible classes. I promised them too that I would ask our Board to allow us to visit them a couple of times a year for intensive periods of instruction. I think that with a flexible set-up which combines regular letters of advice and encouragement, printed Bible study materials, and periodic visits from Puerto Rico we can see this church make real progress. There are a number of other opportunities like this waiting for us in the Caribbean, and I hope we can follow through with them.

This missionary had the right idea, and the strategy he proposed has been adopted and is working well. The media ex-

plosion in evangelism has planted seeds of faith in many places, but unless mobile missionaries follow up on these contacts most of the seedlings will be lost to the cultists and other of the devil's agents. Needed are modern "Pauls" who know the language of the area, have had experience in cross-cultural evangelism, possess the gift of teaching, and are allowed the degree of mobility which will allow them to move in when opportunities are presented. They must also know Christian doctrine and how to teach and apply it to fresh needs and new situations. Finally, they must understand the basics of church polity so that they can train believers in Christian discipleship and responsible local leadership.

The fourth stage in the Ephesus plan for urban evangelization consists of periodic follow-up visits. The Book of Acts states plainly that follow-up was one of the secrets of Paul's strategy, and "the Pastoral Epistles imply a number of journeys which cannot be fitted into the itineraries of Paul that are recorded in the book of Acts."⁵ Paul returned to the places where he had established beachheads for the gospel to nourish and encourage the new believers. He also sent his assistants, men like Timothy, Titus, and Tychicus (I Tim. 1:3; Titus 1:5; and Eph. 6:21, 22), to convey messages, correct false teachings, organize churches, and pastor believers.

Today, mission leaders are aware that we are moving rapidly away from the stage of missions in which Western missionaries "dug in" at one place and remained there for many years. Hardly anywhere in the world can a missionary say for sure that he will not be forced out either by the government or various nationalist influences. At the same time, more contracts and opportunities are open to missionaries than ever before. Travel is fast and relatively easy, and never has follow-up been easier than it is now. At a time when foreign domination of national churches is deeply resented and every semblance of paternalism needs to be avoided, it seems that Paul's Ephesus plan has a great deal to offer by way of guidance toward an effective increase of urban churches without dependence on long-term missionary residence or control.

⁵ William Hendriksen, *Bible Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1961), p. 419.

Even as I say this, however, I want to clarify a related point about which I feel very deeply. It concerns the missionary's identification with and relationship to the Christians in the young church that the missionary hopes to build up. The intimacy of Paul's contacts with churches like that of Ephesus is very striking. His stay in their midst was not an extensive one, but while he was there he lived very intensively with those who responded to his preaching. His letters indicate how extensive, intimate, and personal was their knowledge of him, and his of them. Paul understood his mission as that of nurturing men to Christian maturity, and this required establishing close personal relationships with them. He knew that he could not deepen their faith and lead them to follow his example if he at the same time kept them "at arm's length." In this connection it is worth pondering a statement which Willis P. De Boer makes in his book *The Imitation of Paul*.

The church of today has resources available in its work of evangelism and Christian nurture of which Paul could not have dreamed. There is now great opportunity of multiplying one man's voice through public address systems, microphones, television cameras, printing presses, duplicating machines, addressographs. There is much emphasis in Christianity on doing things in a big way and in reaching and serving large numbers of people. The influence of close personal relationships, of example and of imitation does not lend itself to these easy processes of multiplication. Are close personal relationships, imitation, and example to be regarded as obsolete for present-day Christianity? Is it possible that they are too time-consuming for such critical times as these? One finds difficulty projecting Paul into the present situation. However, it is noteworthy that Paul's time-consuming personal working and living with people did bring forth results which were neither trivial nor insignificant. Perhaps the church of Christ would be well-served with more Christian leaders working at a slower pace, limiting their contacts and activities, and opening their personal Christian lives sufficiently to permit of imitation—be it only by a few.⁶

⁶ Willis Peter De Boer, *The Imitation of Paul: An Exegetical Study* (Kampen, the Netherlands: J. H. Kok, 1962), p. 216.

The fifth and final stage of Paul's ministry to Ephesus is represented by his Epistle to the Ephesian church. I consider this letter to be a kind of six-chapter "extension course" in doctrine, ethics, and practical Christian piety. The letter was probably intended for a wide circle of house churches and growing congregations. Written during Paul's first Roman imprisonment, the epistle provided solid nourishment for the growth toward maturity of the Christians to whom it was sent.

When should a missionary leave? When should control be turned over to the national church? These are important questions which every missionary and mission organization faces. Sometimes the apostle Paul was not faced with the question because he had to run for his life and leave the young churches earlier than he intended. But one of the strikingly beautiful features of Paul's farewell to the elders of Ephesus was his deep trust in the power of the Word and the Spirit to nourish and protect them in the days ahead. This ought to be the goal of every missionary, the planting of a church like that at Ephesus, to whose leaders it can be said without a doubt or delay: "And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32, RSV).

Postscript to Answer an Objection

Trusting the Word and Spirit is difficult for us to do. We tend to believe that our presence and control are indispensable and the young churches cannot survive without us. In this vein, and I hope that I am not misjudging them, some mission leaders have objected to Paul's approach, calling it superficial as a general policy and admissible only in emergency situations. This forces us to consider how effective Paul's strategy really was. Three decades later, what remained of the churches he had established? We cannot blame his strategy for the destruction wrought by the hordes of Moslems several centuries later, but we do have a right to inquire as to the endurance of a church like Ephesus within a reasonable period and on the basis of the information we have available.

When Paul, during his first Roman imprisonment, wrote the Epistle to the Ephesians, he did not so much as hint that things were going wrong in the church. Five years had passed since

Paul's stay in the city, but no discouraging news had reached the apostle's ears. Instead, Paul gave thanks to God for their love to all the saints (Eph. 1:15) and without any reservation drew them into the deep and mysterious relationship between human love and divine (Eph. 5:22-33).

The last word about Ephesus came from Christ himself (Rev. 2:1-7). Ephesus was the first of the seven churches to be addressed by the exalted Lord through revelation to the apostle John. The Ephesian church was by that time in serious danger, for its members had forsaken their first love (Rev. 2:4). The outward structures and formal adherences were still present, but the inner devotion to Christ and the spiritual power that had once been there were almost gone.

What had gone wrong? Had Paul's strategy proven to be weak? Was he mistaken in trusting the pastoral care of this flock to the spiritual overseeing of the elders? Not at all. What had happened at Ephesus was that a new generation of members had grown up during the thirty-plus years since the church was established, and while they were heirs of the traditions they had lost much of the power. The forms that for their parents had been filled with life still survived, but the life had departed. They preserved the outlines of Christian truth, but their love for him who is the Truth had grown cold. That is why Christ called them to repentance.

This needs to be remembered whenever we hear arguments to the effect that Paul's strategy in Acts was generally circumstantial and justifiable only in emergencies. The churches which Paul established did not last forever, but the things that went wrong at places like Ephesus were not due to inherent faults in his strategy. Actually, the first generation of Ephesian Christians kept the faith very well and attained unparalleled heights of spiritual maturity. We note the "heights" from which Christ reminds them they had fallen (Rev. 2:5). But thirty years later another generation had arisen and the glory was departed. That could happen regardless of the length of time the founding missionary might have remained. What Christ's Word to the Ephesian church clearly implied was this: each successive generation of Christians must embrace Christ by faith personally and appropriate for themselves the apostles' teachings and example, or otherwise they will fall like Ephesus and lose the great heritage they received.