



Four URBAN legends examined

“A popular myth of recent origin.” So goes one definition. Legends often are embellished stories or perceptions that have attached themselves to a bit of truth. Following are what I am calling urban legends, or common perceptions that do not adequately, accurately, or completely reflect the truth.

“The city is dangerous”

Thirty-one years ago, I brought my bride of a few days to live and work in one of the most dangerous areas of Chicago. She has never been harmed. She has had some scary moments, but she could have had scary moments at a suburban mall. My five children have all been raised in what is perceived to be a very dangerous neighborhood. None of them have ever been threatened, much less assaulted. Our church family has spent countless hours on the streets in neighborhoods that are called dangerous.

Mind you, cities have more sinners per square inch. So there is more sin, and consequently, more “danger.” I will not deny the potential for danger here or anywhere else. You haven’t forgotten Columbine, Jonesboro, or Pearl, have you? This is a dangerous world. We are immortal until God decides it’s time for us to go home. Does potential danger determine whether or not I carry out Christ’s mission?

“The city is unfriendly and cold”

I dare you. Take a load of clothes into the laundromat a block from my house. In a couple hours, if you show yourself friendly, you will have made several new friends. Pull up to some people waiting on the corner at the bus stop and ask for directions. Invariably, you will meet people happy to help.

Sure, I grant you there are differences between urban culture and rural culture. No, we don’t wave to everyone who goes by. If we did, we’d never get anything done. More people in close proximity impacts the way you interact with people around you. I’ll never forget driving down a country road with my grandfather near his farm. As we passed an oncoming pickup truck, the driver waved. Grandpa waved back. “Do you know him?” I asked. Grandpa smiled, “No,” he answered without explanation. When you only see a few people a day, you’re going to respond differently than you do when you see thousands.

Even if the city was unfriendly and cold, isn’t “the love of God shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost” (Romans 5:5)? Are we not to reach out to everyone in His love and power?

“The city is no place for white people”

The perception that large cities are predominantly black always was in error; even more so now. Demographics vary from city to city, but the fact is, even after “white flight,” what was left behind was not all African-American. Now, center cities are gentrifying and even more ethnic mix is in evidence. When Chicago’s black population was at its peak in the ’70s, there were still 1 million white people inside the city limits.

But what if the city WAS complete-

ly made up of an ethnic group different from yours, or a cultural group not your own? Has God not “made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth ... that they should seek the Lord” (Acts 17:26-27)? Does it make sense for our churches to spend millions of dollars to reach people not like us who live thousands of miles away and ignore people different from us living a few miles away?

“The city is good for nothing”

“Just nuke ‘em all,” somebody says of our cities. We must understand that everything in the city is magnified, multiplied, and intensified — the good, the bad, and the ugly. Cities are centers of education, entertainment, the arts, the media, political power, business, communications and health care. “That’s just it,” you say, “Most of the things that are negative in our society come from cities.” Ah yes, perhaps. But have you considered the connection between Christian abandonment of education, the arts, media, politics, etc. and the fact that they are such negative forces in society?

Most importantly, cities are concentrations of souls. That which God values most is collected in great masses in the world’s urban centers. The 50 largest cities in the U.S. contain 58 percent of our nation’s population. By the year 2025, two-thirds of God’s world will be urban. Undoubtedly, this is why the Holy Spirit led Paul to focus his church planting in the cities of the Roman Empire.

Cities are valuable in God’s eyes because they are jammed with people who need Him. That’s no urban legend.