



DEMYTHOLOGIZING URBAN MINISTRY

PART 2

A man approached the gate of heaven.

"Tell me one good thing you did in your life," St. Peter said to him.

"Well," the man replied, "I devoted my life to urban ministry. One day, I saw a group of gang bangers picking on an old man, so I ran up and kicked the leader in the shins."

"When did this happen?"

"About 40 seconds ago."

Okay, I did get a chuckle out of that one, but the myth that "urban ministry is so dangerous" is far too prominent. I have lived and worked with my wife and five children in the most dangerous neighborhoods in Chicago and have never been swung at, much less shot at. Here are several more myths that should be recognized for what they are.

The "already evangelized" myth

This myth has legs because we think, if the gospel is available in a region, that area is evangelized. I'm grateful for every tract distributed, every radio program proclaiming sound doctrine, and every TV program pointing to the cross of Christ. However, God's plan of evangelism was incarnational. The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. Jesus pitched his tent among us to live a life of service, to die a death of atonement, to conquer death in a supernatural, dramatic, historic, physical resurrection. We assume that the apostles did street preaching because they couldn't get on the radio. Last time I read Matthew 28:19, it still said, "Go."

God intends evangelism to take place through living witnesses. The apostles were living witnesses. Stephen was a living witness. God's program is to transform people who then bear witness to the gospel, who share the information of the gospel from their testimony.

A helicopter pass over a city, pour-

ing tracts down on lost souls does not quite capture what God had in mind when He told us to go and preach the gospel to every creature. The fact is, many cities have large areas with few to no transformed people; no living witnesses. There may be plenty of cultural religion of various breeds, brands, and stripes, but the area is not evangelized.

The "too difficult" myth

Many hold to the idea that cities are too big, too vast, too busy, too intense, too dangerous, too sinful, too godless, or too far gone. Everything costs too much, takes too much time, takes too much energy, and is just plain too hard. Are these reasons not to engage in or support urban ministry? Nineveh had to be the capital city of spiritual difficulty, but God loved Nineveh so much He sent Jonah to preach repentance to those urban dwellers. Nothing is too hard for God.

Every city represented in the New Testament, Jerusalem included, was too difficult. Yet the gospel proved powerful enough to transform people who became churches in each of those cities.

The "too easy" myth

I'll never forget a young man who visited our prayer meeting a few years ago. He came from out of town to visit relatives for a holiday. He told me he worked on the bus ministry at his church and gave me a treasure chest of toys that was available back then in various

bus ministry promotion catalogs. I was grateful for the gift. We had a route ministry at the time and we were flat broke; just buying pencils was a challenge. As he handed over the cardboard treasure chest full of prizes, he said, "Man, I'd love to live here. I'd set this town on fire!"

Knowing the context from which he came, I understood completely what he was saying. When he drove down our street looking for a parking place, he had to drive through nations of children. He knew it would be a cinch, with the right prizes and enough hard work, to gather hundreds, maybe thousands, of these kids. What I knew was that kids are fairly easy to reach, but a thousand kids doesn't make a church. Sure, there may be some things that appear easy in urban ministry, but that easiness has myth written all over it.

The "not my call" myth

"It takes city people to reach city people," somebody says. It's really interesting how we use spiritual language to cover our positions, our fears, our mindsets, our biases. The fact is, people reach people. Love is the ultimate cross-cultural communication. Besides, there are plenty of people in cities just like you.

When Isaiah overheard a conversation, "Who will go for us? Whom shall I send?" He interrupted, "Here am I. Send me." You need a call? All God needs from us is an understanding mind and a willing heart.