



# URBAN CURRENT

## Nothing new

**U**rban ministry is no contemporary phenomenon. From the first century through the Middle Ages, during and following The Industrial Revolution right into modern times, urban congregations have engaged in great exploits for God.

The City Temple of London was founded in 1640 by Dr. Thomas Goodwin, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell. Still in existence, it must be one of the oldest urban churches in the world.

Following this ecclesiastical bus down history's highway, first in the right lane of Orthodoxy, then drifting to the left lane, then over the double yellow line of Biblical authority into dangerous oncoming Theological Modernism makes for an informative journey. Its doctrine was never more sound, its spiritual temperature never more warm, its pulpit never stronger than when Joseph Parker, the dramatic contemporary of Charles Spurgeon, held forth from this urban sacred desk.

The similarity of issues and challenges faced by an urban church 150 years ago with those of present day is striking. Zero in on pulpiteer Parker. Listen to the description of the period immediately preceding Parker's arrival: "... for two years the church remained shepherdless ... a period of severe testing of loyalty ... considerable anxiety for the office bearers ... outer circle of church adherence quickly fell away ... resignations of influential church members increased alarmingly through migration to the outlying suburbs. The latter, fast-growing tendency represented a serious menace to the various existences of all the city churches."

On the Lord's Day, September 19, 1869, Joseph Parker, 40, came to City Temple. Here are some paragraphs from that first sermon:

*"I have ventured to look at London itself, that great and immeasurable 'centre without a circumference;' I have ventured to look on young men, on strangers, on poor forlorn castaways that would be glad to hear a word of divine hope.*

*I have thought of all these. And what if God should give me somewhat of result out of these? He would, if it so pleased Him.*

*"We must dream. If we fall back entirely on facts, we shall never be facts ourselves. We must dream and hope, and try and determine, and work as if everything depended on us, and then get away as if we were nothing and had not done anything."*

The need to relocate was apparent several years before Parker arrived. With his arrival, the need pressed in. A strong element in the congregation believed that the only right move was to the suburbs. Parker would have none of it. He declared, "We are in the Great City and here we will set up a standard for truth, liberty, and progress as these terms are understood in Jesus Christ." He led the congregation against a move-out mentality, against the obstruction of some of the trustees, and against the popular notion from "expert advisors" that "It would be impossible to find another appropriate site within the city of London."

In May 1874, the new edifice, in a prime location in the heart of London, was open to the public. A point of no little controversy was the city's gift to the church of its new pulpit, bearing the inscription, "The Gift of the Corporation of London, AN.DOM. 1874." The old building had had no musical instrument. The new building had an organ installed. This set more tongues wagging.

Parker said it was in his heart to "make the pulpit of the City Temple a terror to evil doers, a tower of strength to all who are honest and pure, and a light to all who are asking the way to truth and the love of God."

*The Daily Telegraph* said early in 1903, "Less than one person in ten goes to church or chapel." Parker packed the 2,500-seat City Temple consistently. With lionlike appearance and demeanor he roared application of biblical truth, addressing personal salvation, urban

issues, and international challenges.

During Parker's 30 years of service at City Temple he addressed the deceiving appearance of an urban congregation. "A stranger coming in the City Temple looks around and thinks there is no need for him to give assistance to such a prosperous looking place. He forgets that every other man is looking around and thinking exactly the same thing! This of course means that the well-filled church and the well-to-do look of the congregation are against us. A man comes to me and says: 'Send us 20 pounds for our mission.' When I reply that funds are not as plentiful with us as he seems to imagine, he looks astonished, and casting an eye around the place he says: 'Look at your people.' 'All right, my dear fellow,' I reply, 'but you forget how many of them are here today and gone tomorrow. These fleeting visitants who throng our services encourage us mightily by their presence, but there is a little something else needed to keep things going.'"

Albert Clare comments in his record of the congregation, "At the City Temple it can never be for any minister merely a question of 'carrying on.' To achieve success or even to maintain his position effectively a minister must be temperamentally adventurous and forward moving. To stand still spells retrogression."

Decline due to shifting demographics, finding doctrinally sound leadership, facing the stay or move question, dealing with financial instability related to urban disengagement and transiency, challenging social and political issues of the day; City Temple has seen it all. There is nothing new under the sun.



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