



# URBAN CURRENT

## Preaching to the Obama generation

Should the Gospel preached in an Iowa cornfield be any different from the Gospel preached in Times Square?

Cities run the world. For the first time in human history, one out of every two people on the planet live in an urban area. Non-urbanites live under the influence of urbanites. Urbanization has colored our culture. You live, eat, sleep, play, and minister in an urbanized world.

We must connect our proclamation to our reality.

Peter's message in Acts 2 is in a religious city, to a biblically literate crowd of God-fearing people, living in a theistically based culture. That world does not exist any longer.

Peter begins with people who already believe in the one true God, people so devout they have gathered from all over the Empire to celebrate the feast of Pentecost. They're familiar with the Old Testament Messianic Scriptures.

Notice how Peter preaches the Gospel at Pentecost? He quotes scripture they know (verse 16). He points to the Jesus they know (verse 22) and familiar cites and events (verse 32).

In Athens, Paul preaches to a pluralistic, hedonistic, materialistic, and humanistic crowd. Ah, this sounds more like our world where post-modernism rules.

Paul starts where he is. He's standing on the Areopagas. Sprawled below him is the bustling Agora. Soaring above him is the Athenian Acropolis crowned with the glorious Parthenon. We can't start with where we aren't. We aren't in Jerusalem. We aren't in the 1800s. We live in a post-modern, urbanized, 21st-century world.

Paul starts where his hearers are. They're in Athens, soaked in polytheistic mythologies, raised to worship humanity, the human form, human achievement, and human pleasure.

Paul starts where the people are. Isn't that the whole idea of the incarnation? Paul attracts their attention by referencing the Acropolis. You can almost see him gesture toward the

gleaming temples. He uses the known to bridge to the unknown. Paul begins with the Creator and creation (verse 24). He moves to logical thought (verses 24 and 25). He introduces reasonable ideas (verses 26-29). He skillfully applies the reasonable to move to the theological. He wraps up in verse 31, unashamedly supernatural, and eschatological.

Preaching an Acts 2 message in an Acts 17 world isn't spiritually wise. Put another way, it may be a whole lot of bad stewardship.

I've heard misguided minds try to make a case that, while Peter preached a strong Gospel message, Paul watered it down for the Athenians. Peter enjoyed unbelievable success with 3,000 immediate converts while Paul records none in Athens.

No. No. No. This is just the point! Paul's audience does not have what Peter's audience had. Paul's audience didn't start where Peter's audience started.

Today, we evangelize humanistic, hedonistic, pluralistic, materialistic, biblically illiterate self-worshippers. It's going to take a little longer. It's going to take time to build a foundation of who the true God is, how He has worked through creation and history, unfolding His plan to meet man's deepest need, that of a Savior.

I make these observations from an urban pulpit straddling two centuries, from a perch on the seam of two millenniums. My perspective is informed by my life location. Chicago is a world-class city that wields disproportionate influence. Consider Al Capone's world fame. We are the city that tipped the nation for Kennedy in the 60s. Our Michael Jordan became a global icon. Even now, the "Chicago way" holds sway over the whole world, (or doesn't, depending on your view) through Chicagoan Barack Obama.

Can we acknowledge that we live in an urbanized world? This world is God's. The earth is the Lord's, all of it, the world and everybody

who lives in it. Urbanization didn't catch God off guard.

As believers, we are to love the world as God loves it. He gave His best. The 21st-century version of this is loving an urbanized world. This is not optional for Christians. If we love God, we will love what He loves.

Embracing an urbanized world begins with not fighting it, not running from it, but understanding our hearts and our arms are the heart and arms of God. Embracing an urbanized world means learning to live in it with spiritual effectiveness and fruitfulness. Jesus said He came not to be served but to serve. Surely living in an urbanized world means serving.

It is in the flow of this tide of urbanization that we think about proclaiming the Good News.

For we who live in this country, it means preaching to Obama's America. Our President is a symbol of the urbanized world.

This is our reality. God knew this would be our reality. The gospel is not deficient. It's powerful in Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome. Alexandria, Geneva, and London. Boston, Beijing, L.A., and Lagos. Keokuk, Shelbyville, and Timbuktu.

History is replete with gospel preachers who knew how to connect with their world. Chrysostom, Savonarola, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, Spurgeon, Booth, Moody, Williams, Criswell.

We need a generation of gospel-proclaimers who skillfully communicate with an urbanized world.



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