

11-22-09
Sermon Notes
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This sermon was basically an intro to a new series I'm starting on 1 Corinthians.

The bibliography on urban ministry is too big even to get into here, but suffice it to say, there are a lot of good books to read on the topic, starting with the book of Acts itself. Paul is the ultimate urban missionary and churches that want to minister in urban/suburban areas need to study his work as recorded in the book of Acts.

Other outstanding works include those by Harvey Conn, Leslie Newbigin, Steve Corbett's *When Helping Hurts*, Tim Keller's *Ministries of Mercy*, Ray Bakke, etc.

Questions for city churches: Do we add value to the city? If we disappeared would the city miss us? Do they say, "We don't know what we'd do without those people! They push so much value into the city, we'd have to raise taxes to make up for what they contribute!" Are we a "good neighbor" church? What is our reputation and why? What is our legacy in the city?

The historical examples of city ministry I gave could be multiplied – and those I gave deserve much more careful study themselves. For example, Charles Simeon not only ministered to poor individuals in families, but he also dealt with structural evil, travelling monthly to London to help William Wilberforce fight the African slave trade. Real cultural reshaping only happens we deal with evil in terms of the gospel at both personal and societal levels. Good works and political engagement are no substitute for the straight forward proclamation of the gospel, but proclamation alone is not sufficient. (If it were, why did God give the church deacons?)

Don't think of mercy ministry as a one way street. It's always a reciprocal relationship. We tend to think the poor need the rich. But the rich also need the poor – if nothing else to serve as a constant reminder that we are *all* utterly

dependent on the riches of Christ for salvation. Everything we have a gift of mercy.

A pastor in inner city Chicago was frustrated that his church lost so many of its young men to gangs. So he finally set up a meeting with the gang leader to see what was going wrong. He asked: "How do you get hold of our young men?" The gang leader said, "When they go play basketball, I'm there and you're not. When they're walking to school, I'm there and you're not. When they go to the store for their moms, I'm there and you're not. And every time I'm there and you're not, I win and you lose."

Gangs are just psuedo-churches. Young men turn to gangs because they are looking for a place to belong, looking for mentorship, looking for community in a world full of alienation and despair.

Wherever you live, it's the same. Those who serve and build community gain influence and "moral authority." We have to keep asking: Do we love our city enough to "be there" the people in need around us? As in the days of the late Roman Empire, society is disintegrating and people are looking places to connect and find deep, trustworthy relationships. The church should be such a place.

God loves the city, and we must love the city as well. Pray for the city of Birmingham as you drive around, go on walks or jogs, as you go to work or school. Pray for the different sections of the city, the different subcultures and ethnic groups and socioeconomic classes that make up the metro area. Remember: This is God's city, and it is your city. As we proclaim God's truth, embody his mercy, show hospitality, and build community, we will find his kingdom moving from victory to victory. This is what God calls our deacons to do; it is what he calls all of us to do.