



Charles Lyons, Pastor
Armitage Baptist Church
Chicago, Illinois

Urbanology 101

The unairconditioned train car is packed with sweating men in gray work clothes, sweating men in ties and jackets, and a few perspiring women in dresses and heels. Black and white are pressed together, hurtling through the air. I'm eight years old accompanying my dad headed downtown, riding Chicago's El (elevated train). I see no other kids on the train. The route slashes through Chicago's South Side black belt. Mere feet from the tracks are the back porches of grimy tenements, windows and doors open in hopes of catching a breeze. You can actually look into the lives of people as you pass their apartments.

It's 2008 and I'm headed for O'Hare and to Raleigh, North Carolina, to preach. Hispanic, Anglo, African-American, Asian, men in ties, students with knapsacks, women in business suits, blue-collar workers in their various uniforms jam the train. The train speeds down the center of the expressway, cars zoom along on the right going our direction and on the left going the other way. Overhead, planes are in their landing patterns.

The city is nothing, if not noisy, dirty, and fast moving. There's mystery in the juxtaposition of the moving and the fixed, the steadfast. At first glance, it seems like everything is in motion. But then you notice the apartment building that's been there 100 years. The Democratic Machine is as much a fixture as Lake Michigan. My freshly-washed car can sit in front of my house unmoved and in 24 hours will have a coat of fine dust. The noise? Well, let me just say we do noise in layers. The hum of the expressway a mile away creates a backdrop. Soon the roar of the

rapid transit train four blocks away commands attention. But even against that roar, the wail of a siren going down Kedzie Boulevard a block away demands notice. Then, the mindnumbing volume of the ice cream truck ditty (on a 12-second loop) stopping in front of my house completes the cacophony.

Everything in the city is magnified, multiplied, and intensified — the good, the bad, and the ugly. Keokuk, Iowa, does not have the Shedd Aquarium, the Field Museum, the Oriental Institute, nor the Chicago Art Institute. Neither do they have 35 public school students shot dead in one school year.

"Sociologist Louis Wirth...produced a classic definition in 1938 that scholars still debate, deny, correct, or modify. 'A city,' he argued, is 'a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals.'" (Wirth, quoted by Conn and Ortiz, 159)*

From Ur to Osh, from Babylon to Beijing, from Alexandria to Anchorage, from Nineveh to Nairobi, cities have been capitals of nations, empires, and kingdoms; centers of government, therefore places of power; centers of commerce, consequently places of business; centers of religion, therefore concentrations of worship; centers of transportation, consequently travel hubs and destinations; centers of education, where thousands come for learning; centers for the arts, so beehives of creativity and expression; centers of architecture, for function and for sheer beauty; meccas of entertainment, because all the people who live there and come there sooner or later want diversions and amusement.

"Waters run down hill and the highest hills in America are the great cities," said Dwight Moody. If cities are

sociological hilltops, it is reasonable to understand that what happens in the city is not contained there. Rather the city impacts the surrounding area and influences the larger social structure and culture. Cities are distribution engines. Whatever is in the city will be distributed: homosexual political clout, drugs, school violence, or the gospel. Cities are amplifiers. The ideas and the sounds originating in the city will be amplified from the city. Because the city functions in this way, you can run but you can't hide.

There are various kinds of cities. There are political cities like Washington, D.C. and Moscow. There are commercial cities like Dallas and Hong Kong. There are industrial cities like Shanghai, entertainment cities such as Las Vegas or Monte Carlo, cultural cities like Paris and Athens. There are historical cities, academic cities, religious cities. The global village is a network of large cities.

How sharp a sociologist is God? Isn't God the ultimate missiologist? Does understanding how cities function clarify the fact that the Holy Spirit led Paul from city to city to plant churches to evangelize the first century world? Does "This took place for two years, so all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks," (Acts 19:10) take on new significance?

Over half the world's inhabitants live in metropolitan areas and the remaining population is influenced by those urban centers. These masses are not huge numbers but individual souls. God loves each one and the God who loves said, "Go."

*Conn, Harvie M., and Ortiz, Manuel. *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, & the People of God. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001. p. 159*