

URBAN CURRENT

Voice of a veteran

"There are practitioners who are not veterans. There are veterans who are no longer practitioners. There is nothing like hearing from a veteran who is still a practitioner."

So read my liner notes on John Thompson's excellent volume titled *Urban Impact*. I continue, "John Thompson writes from the field. This work helps meet the urgent need for urban ministry perspective in material that is rooted in scripture, tested in practice, and based in the local church. This volume is the voice of a man who lives the life and knows what he is talking about."

Frankly, nothing gets my goat quicker than the academician, sociologist, wanna-be expert of any stripe, Christian or not, pontificating from some ivory tower on "life and work in the city." Then there are those who spent a summer working with a para-church organization while a student or the person who pastored for two or three years in an urban community. Add to this list those who have lived and/or worked in the "inner city" of a small city. These guys may have done some research, gained some insight, had some experiences, but in my opinion, not enough to be writing books or working the lecture circuit.

When I landed here 40 years ago, I didn't know what I was doing and I didn't know anyone else who did either. The voices I heard or the resources I ran across tended to be from observers or visitors. It didn't take me long to see the value of their perspective would be quite limited. So when John told me he was working on a book on urban ministry, I was thrilled. I knew his contribution would be significant.

I have known John for 32 years. For 18 of those, John and his wife Debbie were here at Armitage. For 13 years we worked shoulder to shoulder on staff. I know his family. I know his history. We've spent hours on our knees together. We faced urban challenge after urban challenge together. We've seen God work miracles.

I've watched John literally trust God for basic necessities standing on Matthew 6:33. When he writes on the all-important subject of family life in an urban environment, I know he knows what he's talking about. I've watched him father his kids. I've seen him and his wife shepherd their children to become warriors for Christ.

There are more urban ministry resources than ever before. As in any other field, you want to tap the best. John's effort, published in 2011, provides a well-rounded primer for any believer living or working in a metropolitan area. He addresses the theological lenses through which to see and understand the city from God's perspective. He discusses how the city leverages its influence. He speaks to the role of the city in world evangelism. He deals with the personal requirements of those seeking to be effective in urban ministry. He talks about the necessary elements for successful urban impact. He describes biblical discipleship as it plays out on the streets of great cities. He spends two chapters discussing effective compassion, connection, and service to those who are disenfranchised. He attacks one of the city's greatest issues and society's greatest challenges — the fatherless family. He gives attention to church planting in an urban environment.

This is not a glorified pamphlet and its 192 pages include an extensive bibliography.

Dr. Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, says, "I can tell you that the one chapter on the absent father, the greatest problem on our society, would be worth the purchase price of the book and every second of the valuable time it takes to read it. If I could only read one book this year on evangelism and especially how to reach the teeming masses of people in the inner cities in our world, it would be this book by John Thompson."

This volume is replete with personal experiences and insights resulting from John living out his life's passion — making disciples. I've

witnessed John pouring his life into man after man after man after man, patiently nurturing, teaching, and modeling.

Cities, large and mid-size, have changed dramatically in the last 20 years with city centers revitalizing, rebuilding, repopulating. The influx of yuppies and hipsters to center cities across America has brought major changes to the look, feel, and yes, needs of urban ministry.

While the bulk of the book is helpful in understanding and serving the city, it might lead one who does not know better to believe that urban ministry continues to be primarily "ministry in the hood." Since most of John's life and ministry have been in broken communities, his work is weighted in that direction. And take note, increasingly urban poor have been displaced to suburban areas where believers must now learn how to serve people they only know through news reports.

So, two cautions:

- Don't read the message of the book as saying the city is monolithic in its social brokenness.
- Don't expect material targeting urban newcomers, the up and out.

Because you live in an urbanized world, you should read this book. Because what happens in cities impacts everybody on the planet, you should read this book. Because you are a believer who cares about living a life that has the greatest possible impact in a needy world, you would do well to read *Urban Impact*.

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