



URBAN CURRENT

Ministering in an urbanized world

Are you doing Jerusalem ministry in an Athens world? Have you ever considered the difference between Peter's Pentecost message and Paul's Areopagus message and asked yourself why?

Jerusalem. Jewish. Centuries of history, tradition, worship, ceremony, and sacred texts. The city is dominated by the Temple Mount and in the first century, the glorious gleaming Herodian temple. Streets sound with prayers, hymns, chants. Its rhythms are created by a religious calendar. Big events are festivals handed down by God to Moses. Everything is regulated by, permeated by a belief in the one true God and the interpretations of His will through His Word. A strict moral code prevails. Every inhabitant strains to know and obey. Most recently, the story of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection has been Jerusalem's headline.

Athens. Greek. City of the highest aspirations of a sophisticated, erudite people. Searching out philosophies and knowledge. Dominated by the Acropolis, crowned by the stupendous Parthenon, monument to the polytheism of the Grecian and Roman world. Worship of the human mind. Adulation of the human body. Celebrations of sensual indulgence. Religion filled with mythical gods, their loves, their wars, their feats, their deaths.

Paul left Jerusalem and the old world it represented behind. Jesus had prophesied its demise. From the glory of Pentecost to waves of persecution, the center of Christian gravity shifted to Antioch. The old world has essentially a scriptural worldview. The prevailing faith expressed in the temple, in the synagogue, was accepted and respected.

In Athens, Paul interacts with the new world. It's the world of pluralism, secularism, and humanism. A world of philosophical and theological exploration and theorizing human achievement and self-actualization.

For a generation I have been a student pursuing how to live, proclaim, teach, and apply

"Jerusalem" truth in an "Athens" setting. The 21st century urbanized, westernized world is secular, pluralistic, and humanistic. You pastor, you shepherd, you minister, you teach Sunday school in this new world.

Here's the deal. Context matters! What are several prominent elements of context that demand attention? The prevalent religious or theological strain certainly matters. Roman Catholic? Mormon? Islamic? This impacts how you minister. The sociological reality comes into play. If this leads us to think about what kind of meeting space is suitable, and what music is appropriate, it will be important in other ways as well. Next, the culture is an undeniable part of our context. This will inform everything from food to schedule to evangelism. Then, what is the political color? This is a huge issue where I serve, and increasingly everywhere. Ignoring it just makes us less effective in pointing people to Jesus.

This is the tale of two cities, the tale of two worlds. Look over your shoulder at a nation that possessed a Judeo-Christian worldview, ethics, and values. Divorce was frowned upon. Profanity not respectable. People who were immodest in public were tramps, sluts, and whores. Birth out of wedlock was a shame.

Look at the nation in which we now live. It is humanistic, pluralistic, secular. We have a President who presumes to re-imagine marriage. Your 9-year-old is watching Miley's pornographic new hit, thinking it's a love song.

Depravity has greater cultural and societal freedom now. The pathologies are deeper, stronger. Relationships are weaker, sicker. All of this is cooking, simmering in a pluralistic broth. This impacts our churches.

We're dealing with game-changing factors that were urban realities a generation ago. They are everyone's reality now. Horrific crimes show up in small towns. Church shootings are creating a new branch of the security industry. Childhood ministry worker screenings are rou-

tine. Sodomite radicals set an agenda forwarded by a self-identified homosexual community that becomes more demanding by the day. The cause has been accepted by the masses. Kids in your church are questioning their gender, exploring various sexual expressions, and/or have friends who are.

What effect has this urbanized new world had on families? Disconnection, brokenness, complications. This generation is technically savvy, but relationally clueless. We shouldn't redefine family. We need to welcome the confusion into the clinic called church. This plays into church health, affects the church leadership pool, and must impact how we teach, preach, and counsel.

Never has there been more discretionary money or time. In this context, how do we measure the spiritual, emotional energy sucked out of people by the pace and complexity of life?

What would it be like to preach to people in the 1700s who had never seen a billboard, never watched one commercial, never seen a lewd video, whose most prominent piece of literature was the Bible?

Context matters. Those who have not paid attention to urbanization are playing catch-up. Our passion to be fruitful must include understanding our context. Answering the how and why questions begins to inform a more effective ministry. The sons of Isaachar understood the times and knew what to do.

Our context directs, never dictates, our ministry. Our context colors, never compromises, our work. It shapes, not restricts, service to our Savior and world. Find the most God-honoring intersection of truth and context.

So how are we doing in Athens?

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