

URBAN CURRENT

Evangelizing an urbanized world

I was on my bike. I had pulled to the curb to tighten my gearshift. Two 13-year-olds walked up. “Bike broke?” one asked. “Nah, just have to tighten something.” The banter gave opportunity to ask, “What do you know about Jesus?” “Who’s he?” was the response. I was flooded!

Many elements of the urban experience belong to the larger culture: personal spirituality cobbled together, a piece of that, some of this, a few of those. Ignorance and/or rejection of historic, Judeo-Christian theological framework. Political color — blue. Transiency, less connection to place.

Hard-learned lessons from decades here in Chicago now seem pressingly relevant everywhere. Early in my ministry, I used the four-step Romans road approach to evangelism and soul winning.

Bad news

1. We are all sinners/separated from God.
2. The price for sin is death.

Good news

3. Jesus paid the price.
4. Salvation is a free gift received by faith.

That’s summarized, but you get the idea.

However, I began to realize people needed a ramp and then, an even longer ramp, leading to step one. “God who? Why should I believe the Bible? Who says it’s sin?”

I found great help in *What’s Gone Wrong with the Harvest?*, James F. Engel, (1975, Zondervan.)

Dr. Engel argues we should assume less and less of the people we evangelize. He describes four steps, which I reworked slightly, making them all begin with A.

Awareness. Simply put, someone cannot respond to something they are not aware of. If one is unaware of the God of Scripture in any definitive form, never mind his Son Jesus, never mind the plan of redemption, awareness must be achieved. This becomes the front end of an evangelistic effort.

Acknowledgement. Once someone is aware of the facts of the Gospel, there must be an acknowledgment of their truthfulness.

Acceptance. One must accept the facts of the Gospel as personally applicable. Personal acceptance of the truth of God’s holiness, love, and mercy through Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection is where most of us jump into the process.

Action. Personal response based on the acceptance after the acknowledgement following the awareness is what we see preached toward and experienced throughout the New Testament.

In my center-city neighborhood, we have experienced demographic sea change. For the better part of three decades, our neighborhood was ground zero for quintessential, inner-city drama. Gangs, drugs, and street violence were our everyday existence.

Gentrification due to powerful political, cultural, sociological forces has transformed our neighborhood from urban jungle to hipster central. We are now one of the hottest neighborhoods in the country.

The old demographic would readily acknowledge the existence of their version of God, the presence of sin and the need, if not the possibility, of redemption. Heaven and hell were not denied. At least there was the crumbling framework of a Judeo-Christian theology.

Now, the younger, affluent, educated, Anglo, politically blue, postmodern crowd is far less likely to acknowledge a God remotely resembling the Almighty of Scripture. So when it comes to evangelism, we must start farther out, use a longer ramp.

When Paul arrived in a city, he began in the synagogue. He got a jump-start with the Jews. They believed in the one true God, His holiness, His almightiness, His promise to send a Messiah, etc. He started with those closest to the truth of the Gospel, working his way out. With the rest of the population, he was starting

much further away from the core of the Gospel. He understood this. Had he started with the pagans, it would have taken longer to create a nucleus for a New Testament church.

The postmodern mindset is no longer merely ruling the cities, it is prevailing in the culture. This generation is as far from God as any generation has ever been. Given that we “Bible bangers and religious fanatics” are viewed as “haters,” getting a hearing can be quite the challenge. At our church we are pursuing a strategy that begins with connection. No connection? No communication.

Recently, in an hour’s time, we connected with 40 people, a slice of the foot traffic passing our building during worship. These were the dog walkers. We offered them a little doggie gift bag — a toy, a treat, and a cleanup bag. From people who would normally go to great lengths to avoid eye contact, we received smiles, hand on the heart, “Oh really,” “Oh, how nice,” “How thoughtful.” All we were doing was connecting.

If we don’t connect, we can’t engage. Engagement is anything that follows connection, ranging from small talk to anything of substance. Seeds of rapport are sown toward relationship. We work at connecting in order to engage so we can evangelize.

Years ago I was trumpeting Jesus’ model of service as a way to connect in order to engage, ramping to evangelism. Serving people who are needy is not difficult. Our foreign missionaries have been doing this for generations. Serving people who are affluent, educated, proud, if not arrogant, can be a whole different universe of difficulty. The goal is the same. Connect. Engage. Evangelize.

Our urbanized landscape is challenging. However, the challenges are what make this a great adventure.

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