

The Church in the Urban World:
A Study of the Characteristic of Urban People and
the Role of the Urban Churches in the City

Youn Dong Choi
Online Campus (NLS)

Course Title: The Church in the Urban World

Semester & Year: Fall 2020

Professor: Dr. Charles O. Galbreath

Date Submitted: Dec 18, 2020

Abstract

The city is a center for education, culture, and arts, and various races live in there. Many people live in the city, and they live in the city as a base of life. The city is very active and everything is moving fast. What can we find in the place where there are dazzling streets and tall skyscrapers? Wouldn't it just be a place of opportunities where people can find various jobs and enjoy the richness of life?

Through this study, I would like to study the concept of the city and its characteristics, the city in post-modernism, and the ministry for the Urban churches. Also, this study, I would like to investigate how urban churches can understand the situation and characteristics of the urban people, and how to do ministry for them more systematically.

Urban Concept

There are many cities in the world. These are big cities such as Paris, London, New York, Seoul, and Tokyo. Many people live in these cities, selling and buying goods, and active and productive things are happening. The city is constantly moving like a huge factory. In the cities, there are generally houses, transportation, sanitation, utilities, and systems to control them. Also, government organizations and businesses are closely connected with the people who use them and give them advantage of using them. Wikipedia defines City as this. “A city is a large human settlement. It can be defined as a permanent and densely settled place with administratively defined boundaries whose members work primarily on non-agricultural tasks.”¹

After the success of industrialization in the 19th and 20th centuries, there was rapid urban growth in Europe and North America. Through this growth, cities have become important to all, and these cities are now globalized out of the region. There are several reasons for the emergence of mega-class cities after rapid urban growth and industrialization. The first is population growth. And second, because of the success of industrialization, people moved from the countryside to the cities. Perhaps these two are connected together. Because of the success of industrialization, many jobs were created in the city, and many people came from the countryside to cities to find the job. Also, new current has begun to form due to urbanization.

As Kleber says: During the first half of the twentieth century the growth of urbanization and the solidification of the modern worldview developed as parallel movements. At the same time incipient forms of the post- modern outlook had already flourished among intellectuals who began to challenge the faith in optimism, progress, and the pursuit of objective knowledge and

¹ Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City>

science, characteristic of the modern worldview.² In the first half of the 20th century, post-modernism was born in large cities against rationalism. Post-modernism was to dismantle our absolute values, such as religious beliefs, authority, values, rationality, discipline, etc. It was to question the absolute value, interpret it arbitrarily, and dismantle the absolute value. The post-modernism was born as a result of urbanization. Rather than regarding urbanization as a mere outcome of modernity, it may be equally reasonable to see postmodernity as an outcome of urbanization, and globalization as one of the channels through which postmodern elements are conveyed around the world.³ The urban situation where urbanization is strongly progressing has sufficient conditions to create a post-modern condition. However, from the perspective of urban missions, post-modernism has become a tremendous obstacle to the spread of the gospel and a great challenge to the churches.

Urban Characteristic

Accelerating Secularization

Urban Secularization of cities is a phenomenon that everyone is already seeing. Urban secularization is progressing very rapidly. What is secularization? Wikipedia defines secularization as this. “Secularization is the transformation of a society from close identification with religious values and institutions toward nonreligious values and secular institutions.”⁴ In other words, secularization refers to the phenomenon in which religion loses authority in all aspects due to changes in society such as modernization and rationalization. That's what we see as a whole society of ethical degradation. This phenomenon has been rapidly progressing since

² Kleber D. Goncalves, *Missional Models of a Church for Post-moderns in Urban Contexts* (Journal of Adventist Mission Studies, Vol. 10 [2014], No. 2, Art. 7)

³ McManus, Erwin. 1999. Engaging the Third Millennium. <http://www.hmconline.org/shout/53millenium.html> (accessed 9 February 2004).

⁴ Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularization>

the late 20th century due to post-modernism to dismantle all existing authorities. People within this post-modernism no longer recognize the existing authority of society. The rules or values from the existing authority are no longer passed on.

Cities have a structure that makes it more difficult to transmit rules or values from existing authorities. It is difficult for urban people who gather for a variety of purposes to establish relationships with authorities who will transmit rules or values. Urban people do social activities for their own interests, and relationships often end together when their purpose is over. Through these relationships, they cannot share their deep life and share their values. In a word, this situation can be called a state of loss of authority. It is a good expression of the characteristics of the post-modern era, where there is no reliable authority and also hates to recognize authority. It is because urban people naturally live in a state of loss of authority, they are not trained in purpose or values in life. They live according to their opinion. The rapid secularization of society starts from here. Modern urban people living in a state of loss of authority become secularized without consenting to religion or normative authority. In the absence of certain moral standards, rules and values, the secularization of cities proceeds at a tremendous pace. In this secularized world, even Christians' faith values and standards are shaken.

Maximized Individualism

The urban characteristic is strong individualism. Individualism is being enforced in urban areas for economic reasons. It is not easy for urban people to make communities. This is because urban people do not live in one place for a long time due to work or economic reasons.

For urban people who have to move from place to place and find their way to live, individualism is not their choice, but their destiny.

Many people moved from the countryside to the urban area, resulting in the collapse of their families and communities of relatives. In the future, more and more people will live alone. Their lives will become more difficult and lonelier. This is happening in most areas of urbanization, and this will be more convincing in the future. People are difficult to live alone. Everyone needs community. However, modern society has concentrated many people with various purposes into cities. As a result, urban people have a real sense of stability in their lives and live without a community that loves and supports them. In fact, the urban people did not choose individualism. They are just getting used to an individualistic life without community. Urban People do not have friends to listen to their stories, and even if they do, they live without time to meet. In a life in which individualism is maximized that cannot make a community with people, the urban people are living a difficult life.

Distrusting of the Church

Eddie Gibbs warns that in a survey of the people born around 1985, that younger generations have more distrust than their parents, and under such circumstances, countries like the U. S. and the U. K. are increasingly distrusting their institutional authority.⁵ One of these institutional authorities would be the existing church. For the people of this era, especially the critical and moral urban people, distrust of Christianity exists throughout the whole generations. Distrust of some churches has long since led to distrust of Christianity as a whole. The important fact is that distrust in the church is found not only in the younger generation of unbelievers, but also in the younger generation within the church, who should lead the church in the U. S. in the

⁵ Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (InterVarsity Press. 2000), 111.

next generation. It is the same for the church where I serve. From elementary school to high school, they attended church with their parents, but there are many young adults left the church. So, in the church I serve, we are interested in young adult who do not come to church and we encourage them to come to church and pray.

In any society, pastors and scholars were the most trusted group. However, pastors are now the object of distrust in any society. In particular, in the Korean community where I belong, I can meet many believers whose trust in the pastor has been broken. We are living in an era where we have no choice but to distrust the ministers. People who cannot trust even pastors have no choice but to make a society where there is no one to trust. Those who have lost their trust are basically forced to doubt everything. Individual members of society doubt each other. Furthermore, family members at home cannot be trusted. This broken trust can be great disaster to a family and even to a community.

In a society without trust, it creates huge conflicts between individuals and individuals, between individuals and groups, and between groups and groups. These conflicts put great stress on each individual's life. Even in the company where I worked, I could see a lot of people taking Tylenol everyday due to stress. Not only the companies I worked with, but also the employees in the companies I did business with, I could see people taking Tylenol every day. Sometimes this stress can cause to a lot of mental disorders. Most of the stress that causes mental disorders starts with conflict caused by distrust. Urban people in an era of loss of trust are bound to have extreme distrust in the church and the gospel it preaches. The loss of trust leads to distrust in the church, and this distrust leads to a decline in the number of Christians.

The Role and Mission of the Urban Church

So far, we have looked at the life situation of urban people. The urban secularization due to the influence of post-modernism, maximized individualism, and distrust in the church, are the characteristics of the urban people that the church should serve in this era. Can urban people with these characteristics truly believe in and accept Jesus Christ as their Savior? Can they accept the gospel? For us, this fear comes first. But Tim Keller tells us: “Yet here the citizens of the city of God are called to be the very best residents of this particular city of man. God commands the Jewish exiles not to attack, despise, or flee the city — but to seek its peace, to love the city as they grow in numbers.”⁶ According to him, we are in the city of God. Those who belong to the city of God are told not to avoid nor despise those who belong to city of man. Rather, he says that we belong to city of man and become the best residents among them. And he tells us to seek its peace, to love the city.

As Tim Keller says, we are not part of the city of man. We belong to the city of God and are the ones who deliver peace to the city of man. And those who belong to the city of God should preach the good news of God through the community, the urban churches. I think that deliver this good news is mission. Braaten also says this about a call to the essence of the church. Braaten also says this about the nature and vocation of the church: “The nature and vocation of the church has to be seen as essentially missional. In other words, the church was called into existence for mission, in which the church is the means, not the end, of God’s purpose. Therefore, because the church and mission are intrinsically related, a church without mission is as contradictory as a mission without the church.”⁷ Urban churches, especially the churches belong to cities, should faithfully follow their nature and vocation.

⁶ Timothy Kelly, *Center church: doing balanced, Gospel-centered ministry in your city* (Zondervan. 2012), 142.

⁷ Carl E. Braaten, *The Flaming Center: A Theology of the Christian Mission* (Fortress Press. 1977)

Urban culture and the characteristics of life in the city show the shape of modern society and modern culture. Just as Tim Keller defined the city itself as the work of God, urban churches should think that serving the urban people is God's work. And we should think of them as targets of mission and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. What they need is a true dignity, a true community, and a true restoration of trust. If these are not restored, the ministry of urban churches will be difficult. Urban churches should help the city with a low attitude to restore trust. Jesus did the same. Philippians 2:6-8 says: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!" Jesus is God, but in order to save us, he made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, humbled himself, and died on the cross for us. Urban churches should imitate Jesus and abandon the nomism and church-centered faith and serve the world with a low attitude and serve the city. In this way, the skyscraper will reveal God's glory, and the city that was like a huge factory will praise the living God.

Conclusion

Many parts of the city were destroyed by the influence of post-modernism. It has become secularized, individualized, and full of distrust of the church. In a city like this, the church has so much to do. Spiritually broken places should be built up and sew up the torn places. And we need to bring breath of life into a city as a dry bone. However, this breath does not come with our strength and power. Only the Holy Spirit must breathe into the city through us for this breath. We should be tool in bringing the Holy Spirit to breath in a dry city. Even now, God asks us.

“Son of man, can these bones live?” Our answer is always “O Sovereign LORD, you alone know.” It should be said. This is because, in a place full of the influence of post-modernism, in a place full of loneliness and distrust, it is not what we do, but what the Holy Spirit does to bring breath.

We only need to become the tools of the Holy Spirit and let the Gospel of God flow to the city of man given to us with the identity of citizens of the city of God. The Holy Spirit will breathe life into a dry city through us and the Urban churches.

Bibliography

Braaten, Carl E., *The Flaming Center: A Theology of the Christian Mission*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press. 1977

Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press. 2000

Goncalves, Kleber D., *Missional Models of a Church for Post-moderns in Urban Contexts*. Journal of Adventist Mission Studies, Vol. 10 [2014], No. 2, Art. 7

Kelly, Timothy. *Center church: doing balanced, Gospel-centered ministry in your city*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2012

McManus, Erwin. 1999. Engaging the Third Millennium.

<http://www.hmconline.org/shout/53millenium.html>. accessed 9 February 2004

Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Secularization>

Wikipedia, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/City>