

## For the City: *The Potential of Cities*

Genesis 11:1-9

Preached by Minister Jason Tarn to HCC on January 26, 2014

### Introduction

- ❖ The city is the future. The entire span of human history could be described as a slow but steady flow of human population into cities. Granted, for thousands of years it's been a slow trickle. The vast majority of civilization was rural and agrarian. But with the dawn of the Industrial Revolution and the subsequent Digital Revolution, migration into the cities of the world has been exponential. The figures are simply mind-boggling.
  - ▶ In 1800, sociologists tell us that only 3% of the human population lived in cities. Human civilization was largely rural. But by 1900 that figure rose to 14%, and in another hundred years, by year 2000 over half of all humans beings on the planet live in cities. It's estimated that by 2050 up to 80% of the world population will be urban.<sup>1</sup>
  
- ❖ Here's another figure to wrap your head around. Over 5.5 million people in the developing world are moving into cities every single month. That's like a new San Francisco Bay Area being created every thirty days on this planet.
  - ▶ In 1950 there were only two cities classified as *megacities* where they had metro populations over 10 million. That was New York and London. But now there are 23 *megacities* in the world, and experts predict that in just over ten years there will be a total of 37 – most of which are developing in what we once called the Third World.<sup>2</sup>
    - Bringing this closer to home, the metro Houston area (Houston proper, Sugarland, and Woodlands) was estimated at 6.2 million in 2012, but it's forecasted to double to 12 million by 2040. There's a good chance Houston will achieve *megacity* status within your lifetime.
  
- ❖ Do you see what I mean when I say that cities are the future? **Not only are cities the destination of where the vast majority of the world is moving, cities are one of the greatest influences shaping the world today.** In our present day, forty of the largest global cities account for two-thirds of the world's economic output.<sup>3</sup>
  - ▶ That trend has led some to conclude that the age of nations is over. One journal article reads, "*The new urban age has begun. . . . The 21st century will not be dominated by America or China, Brazil or India, but by the city.*" It'll be cities like New York, Shanghai, San Paulo, and Mumbai that give shape to our future. Cities like these will dominate the economic and cultural landscape, producing the businesses, the arts, the entertainment, the ideas, the technology, that shape and define modern society.
  
- ❖ **Cities are our future. And for Christians, I mean that quite literally.** In Genesis 1-2 (the first two chapters of the Bible) God creates the world and plants a Garden. But by Revelation 21-22 (the last two chapters of the Bible) God renews the world and brings down a city, the new Jerusalem. A city is where the people of God will reside with God for all eternity.

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<sup>1</sup> see online: <http://www.albertmohler.com/2010/04/22/from-megacity-to-metacity-the-shape-of-the-future/>

<sup>2</sup> see online: <http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/interactive/2012/oct/04/rise-of-megacities-interactive>

<sup>3</sup> see online: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2008/oct/01/cities.regeneration.uk>

## The Church and the City

- ❖ The city places a central role in our future as Christians, and so too for our present. But unfortunately most of the talk among Christians, when it comes to the city, focuses solely on inner-city problems. We talk about crime, homelessness, hunger, and poverty, and rightly so we strategize ways to alleviate the suffering, to show mercy, to bring compassion.
  - ▶ But inadvertently, we've grown this impression of cities as places of problem rather than places of potential. Urban ministry has become a specialization for particular Christians with a particular burden for the poor. Everyone else in the church is disengaged from what we understand as "urban ministry". It's shortsighted.
  
- ❖ There are typically four ways in which a church will approach and relate to the city.<sup>4</sup> **First, there are churches that are merely *in* the city.** They happen to be geographically located in a city, and they would love for anyone off the street to enter and worship with them. But the primary focus of the church is what happens inside its building. The church is for its people, and on occasion it'll put on an outreach or community service event.
  - ▶ This is a good description of HCC. We're a church that just so happens to be in the city. Our location was strategic, but it was chosen for its central location in respect to suburbs like Sugarland, Clear Lake, or Pearland. We were established as a commuter church reaching the immigrant Chinese who were arriving to central Houston for their studies and training. Yet once they settled in career or family, they moved further out where homes were cheaper, schools were better, and the air was cleaner.
    - Our people would live in the suburbs and commute to work. That was normal. And so it felt just as normal to commute to worship. Immigrant families from all over Houston would commute every Friday and Sunday to worship here in this building. We were established as a church in the city, but primarily to serve the suburbs as a commuter hub. Initially, there was no intention to serve the community around us.
  
- ❖ **Secondly, there are churches *against* the city.** These churches could be in the suburbs or urban areas. What distinguishes them is an attitude of cultural separation. They see the city as the problem. The marketplace, the arts, the media – are all seen as sources of temptation. Christians have no choice but to navigate them, but we're to keep a posture of defensiveness.
  - ▶ Churches that are against the city could be located in the city but intentionally create a sub-culture for their members that attempts to replicate what the city has to offer in order to eventually replace it. Some churches have created gyms, fitness centers, bowling alleys, movie theaters, and coffee shops for their members. They've created an alternative city because they're generally against the city around them.

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<sup>4</sup> Grateful for the categories introduced in the book by Darrin Patrick & Matt Carter, *For the City*, pg. 24-27.

- ❖ **Thirdly, there are churches that are *of* the city.** If some churches are antagonistic towards the city and surrounding culture, churches of the city go to the opposite extreme. They over-adapt, over-contextualize. They uncritically embrace the culture of the city to the point that they lose their distinctive Christian identity.
  - ▶ Their worldview and values, their convictions and practices are totally of the city, of the world. These churches have forsaken their unique calling to speak God's truth prophetically into the city, into its culture.
  
- ❖ **But then there are churches that are *for* the city.** These are churches committed to preaching the gospel, to upholding a biblical worldview and biblical standards of morality. These churches are willing to speak God's truth into the city, into its culture, and they have a receptive platform *because* they're also engaging the city with acts of Christian love and mercy. Believers in these churches are serving the city, using their talents, time, and money to seek the peace and prosperity of their neighbors.
  - ▶ This is what makes a church for the city. **It's about being *for* the good of our neighbors in all dimensions, especially their spiritual, eternal good.** Likewise, it's about making a sacrificial effort to alleviate the suffering of our neighbors, especially their spiritual, eternal suffering. A church for the city recognizes that cities are places of problem and seeks to address those concerns with gospel words and gospel deeds.
    - But a church for the city also recognizes that cities are places of great potential for the mission of God. And it will encourage and equip believers to leverage this potential for the glory of God and the good of all.
  
- ❖ This is the model of cultural engagement that we want at HCC. That's why we're introducing a new ministry theme for the English congregation called *For the City*. And we're kick starting it with a sermon series that will unpack a theological vision for engaging our city as a church on mission for God. My goal is to help you see and appreciate 1) the potential of cities, 2) the problem of cities, and 3) to show what it means for us to be a church *for* the city.

### The Potential of Cities<sup>5</sup>

- ❖ You might be surprised that the Bible has a lot to say about cities. Some Old Testament scholars have argued that the garden described in Genesis 2 was actually more of an urban park – a well-tended plot of land that you'd expect in a city or on palace grounds. Yet the general impression we have of Eden is of a jungle-like paradise. **But it is argued that the command for Adam and Eve to “subdue” the earth (Gen. 1:28) was actually a command to develop a culture – to build a civilization, namely a city.**
  - ▶ People come to this conclusion by looking at the end of the story and reading backwards. In other words, they read Revelation 22 and recognize something familiar in the New Jerusalem. Verses 1-3 describe a central river flowing through the city watering the "*tree of life*". **The realization is that this new city is none other than the same Garden of Eden but now fully developed into a garden-city.**

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<sup>5</sup> My thoughts have been greatly shaped by Tim Keller and his writings on this subject in *Center Church* and *Why God Made Cities*.

- ❖ Remember, Jesus said he is making all things new – not all new things (Rev. 21:5). He came to renew and reform what exists – not to create something entirely new. So it's not like he threw out the plans for a garden and started over with a city. No, a garden-city was what God intended all along. **The New Jerusalem is the Garden of Eden in its fulfillment.** So the vision of a city is in the Bible from start to finish.
- ❖ Now the first explicit mention of cities is found in **Genesis 4:17**. After Cain has killed Abel and after being confronted by the Lord, we read, "<sup>16</sup>*Then Cain went away from the presence of the LORD and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.* <sup>17</sup>*Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. When he built a city, he called the name of the city after the name of his son, Enoch.*"
  - ▶ Now granted Cain is a pretty unsavory character, so it's easy to conclude that anything associated with him should be viewed negatively. But remember the context behind Cain's desire to build a city. He was searching for security. He was looking for refuge.
- ❖ **That's one of the potentials of cities: They're places of refuge for the weak, the poor, the foreigner, the outcast.** Later on in Scripture, we see God giving instructions to Israel to build cities of refuge – cities where sinners could find safety, where justice could be sought and maintained (Num. 35:9-11).
  - ▶ We see this potential for refuge expressed in the passage read earlier. We read that the whole earth had one language, and they said to each other, "*Come, let us build ourselves a city . . . lest we be dispersed over the face of the whole earth.*" (Gen. 11:4). If you're dispersed, if you're scattered, you're vulnerable, you're weak. But if you come together, if you gather especially in a city, you find safety, security, refuge.
- ❖ **Even today cities function as places of refuge for those in the minority, those who are marginalized in society.** Can you imagine a homeless person trying to survive out in the suburbs? It's extremely difficult. The people and institutions that would be sources of mercy and help are way too dispersed, fragmented, and fenced off.
  - ▶ A city is a far more merciful place for **the homeless and poor**. That's why you'll find them there. You see, cities don't make people poor. Rather it's cities that attract the poor because they're places of refuge.
- ❖ Or think about **immigrants**. For those of us who have immigrant parents, just imagine how hard it was for them to enter a brand new culture. To be culturally alienated. But how hard of an adjustment they had depended a lot on whether they immigrated to a big city like Houston (where you have a Chinatown, Chinese community centers, and Chinese churches) versus a small rural college town.
  - ▶ The city is a refuge for those in the minority culture because you can engage the majority culture on the campus or in the workplace, but still find community in smaller enclaves with those from your own culture. That's why new immigrants are mostly found in cities. They're places of refuge.

- ❖ **There's another potential in cities: Cities are also places of innovation, influence, and invention.** Cities are where culture-making takes place. It's where we draw together resources, ideas, and talents from a diverse pool of individuals for the task of developing culture, for subduing the earth and stewarding its resources to build a civilization.
  - ▶ If you go back to Genesis 4, after Cain builds a city, his descendants continue city building, and soon we read of Jubal "*the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe*" (v21) and of Tubal-cain "*the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron*" (v22). What we see here is that out of cities come the development of the arts (of music) and the development of technology (of craftsmanship and toolmaking). **Cities are places of human productivity.**
    - Even at Babel we read that the builders came together and innovated their approach to building by using baked bricks instead of stone and bitumen (asphalt) for mortar (cf. Gen. 11:3).
- ❖ The city is where you'll find advancement in the arts, in technology, in scholarship, in science, in design and architecture. Cities attract the innovators, the influencers, and the inventors because that's where the mentoring, the training, the networking, and the competition is found. In the city.
  - ▶ And I don't care what Vegas says. What happens in the city never stays there. The culture and ideas and technology that's produced and shaped in the city will always expand into the suburbs and into the country. That's the potential found in cities.
- ❖ **Here's one more: Cities are great places for the spiritually curious.** We see this in the Bible where cities have always been magnets for the spiritually seeking. Just look at Babel. What were they trying to build in the city center? Not just a tower but a temple.
  - ▶ Scholars say it was a ziggurat – a stair-stepped, pyramid-shaped tower that was basically a stairway to heaven. It was consider a meeting point of heaven and earth. So these builders were drawn to the city not just for refuge but for worship. It's where you met god.
- ❖ It's true even today. But I know a lot of people view cities as very anti-god. A kid moves to the city for college and that's where he loses his faith. That's the stereotype. **But in actuality, moving into the city could actually be the best thing for you spiritually.** The truth is a person is more likely to be converted to Christianity in the city versus out in the country.
  - ▶ Think about it: If you live in a homogeneous community in the countryside or just in the suburbs, where everyone is a Christian then it's easy to consider yourself a Christian. Or if everyone around you is a Buddhist then you're a Buddhist.
- ❖ But in the city it's so diverse. In the city your convictions will be tested. Your faith will be challenged. You're no longer able to just believe something because everyone around you believes it – because that's simply not the case. The city, by its very nature, will attract the spiritually curious from all kinds of faiths. All seeking God.

- ▶ This means in the city you'll have to wrestle with tough questions and real doubts. That's something you may never have to go through in a non-urban, homogeneous environment. But if you go to the city and go through that kind of testing and still come out believing, then your faith will be even stronger. You'll truly own it.
- ❖ The point is that there's a huge potential for the gospel. People in the city are more spiritually open and willing to be challenged and questioned. There's a huge potential for the mission of the church to make God-loving, compassionate disciples of Christ – in the city.

### The Problem of Cities

- ❖ But no one said cities are without their share of problems. If you just take the three potentials we just considered, if you press further, you'll see **the dark side of cities**. Don't get me wrong. I don't mean to suggest that cities, in themselves, are dark and evil. No, cities are morally neutral. It's the people that reside within them that are dark and evil.
  - ▶ Tim Keller has a great analogy. **He says a city is a magnifying glass for the human heart**. It brings out whatever's inside. A city is humanity amplified for good or for ill.
- ❖ **So cities can be places of refuge, but due to the effect of sin we know that cities can be places of violence.** Just go back to Genesis 4. We already saw how in cities music was first developed. But in vv23-24 we read that the first song was full of violence. Lamech is boasting to his wives about killing a man. So cities are places of refuge yet they're also places of violence.
  - ▶ Or consider Babel. Remember they came together in mass, in close proximity, and built a city so they wouldn't be dispersed over the face of the earth. That sounds innocent enough until you read Genesis 11 in the context of Genesis 9:1 and God's command for humanity to fill the earth – to disperse and populate the planet.
    - So city building, in this case, was an act of rebellion. That's the tension we find in Scripture. Cities are places that draw out the great potential in human hearts but also the great problem of human sinfulness.
- ❖ **So the city is a great place for innovation, influence, and invention, but on the dark side, the city will never let up.** Yes, the city spurs you to excellence but it'll also spur you to exhaustion. It puts a constant demand on you to produce, to succeed, to make a name for yourself.
  - ▶ That's what the builders in Babel say. *“Come, let us make a name for ourselves.”* (v4) Humanity was given the mandate to city build for the glory of God, but instead they were only interested in building a city for themselves to make *their* name great. The city ends up as a place of self-promotion, of self-glorification.
- ❖ So again there's tension. There's huge potential in cities for the spiritually curious. The open people up spiritually – to new ideas, to hear and receive the old gospel in fresh, new ways. **But in cities we also find a concentration of false gods alluring us every which way but towards the One and Only.** They're places of worship, including false worship.

- ❖ Now you still might be thinking that cities seem like pretty secular places. They don't seem very spiritual. But they are! **The tallest, most important, most expensive, most populated building in every city is a house of worship, a temple to whatever god that city worships.**
  - ▶ In New York, the tallest buildings are temples to money and success. In D.C. the most important buildings are temples to power and influence. In Boston, you'll find temples to knowledge and scholarship. And here in Houston, we have temples too. Ironically, some of the most expensive and populated buildings in our city are called "churches", but really they're temples to self-help, moralistic religiosity.
  
- ❖ **Cities are modern-day pantheons for the false gods that humanity worships.** Well God takes notice. He knows the culture-forming, society-influencing power of cities since he invented them. So he comes down in judgment when we corrupt cities by our sin.
  - ▶ **The irony in Genesis 11 is that in their attempt to make a name for themselves, their city ends up being named for God's judgment against their self-idolatry.** In v5 the Lord comes down to see this city and tower they're building and says, *"this is only the beginning of what they will do. And nothing that they propose to do will now be impossible for them."* (v6)
  
- ❖ I don't take that to mean God is wringing his hands in heaven worried about what they'll come up with next. **He's not concerned with the heights of accomplishment that they might achieve but rather the depths of sin that they might fall into.** He's saying, *"If I don't act to retrain their sinfulness, there's no telling how bad it'll get."*
  - ▶ So he comes down, confuses their language, and disperses them over the face of all the earth. They wanted to make a name for themselves and yet now they can't even pronounce each other's names. They wanted to avoid dispersion and yet now they're scattered over all the earth. This is God's judgment, his punishment, but notice that it's filled with mercy and grace.
    - **God is getting them back on track with his redemptive plan.** We know by the end of the story, in Revelation 5, God's plan involves the redemption of a people from every tribe and tongue, every people and nation (v9). So God's getting humanity back on track by creating a table of nations.
  
- ❖ But right into the next chapter, God zeroes in on one particular nation that he'll raise up through one particular man named Abraham. We read in chapter 12 of his promise to make a great name for Abraham. **Humanity tries its best to make a name for itself, but the only name that matters is the one that God makes for us.** And God says he does it – he gives us power, influence, significance, a great name – *so that* we will be a blessing to others (vv2-3).
  - ▶ So the rest of the Bible is about how God keeps his promise to make a great name and a great nation out of Abraham. How it's through the line of Abraham that God will deal with the problem of sin, how he'll renew all things and reverse the effects of Babel. So we enter the New Testament and we're introduced to Jesus, the son of Abraham (Mt. 1:1). And we're told that, in Jesus, God has once again come down to visit the city to see what they're building.

- ❖ And once again there's judgment and punishment, but once again it's full of grace and mercy. We're told that Jesus came down to the city of Jerusalem, and in less than the span of a week he was led right out with a cross on his back. **Hebrews 13** says, "*Jesus also suffered outside the [city] gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. . . . For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.*" (13:12;14)
  - ▶ So again there's punishment for sin, but it's Jesus who takes the punishment for us. He gets dispersed for us. He gets thrown out of the city for us. **He loses the city that is so that by receiving him as Savior you might gain the city that is to come.**
    - And it's in that city to come where you're name is made great. Your citizenship in the new Jerusalem is where you, as a Christian, draw your power and influence and significance (a great name!) – so that you can turn it around to be a blessing to your city today.
  
- ❖ **Friends, it's only through the gospel of Jesus that we can be brought back on track with God's plan for creation.** At Babel things went off track. Everyone spoke one language but ended up unable to understand each other. But we read at Pentecost, in Acts 2, everyone is speaking different languages but the Spirit of the Risen Christ fills his disciples and suddenly everyone understands each other perfectly.
  - ▶ *What does this mean?* It means everything you find problematic with cities – they're dangerous and crime-infested, they burn you out trying to make a name for yourself, there's so much idolatry, especially self-idolatry – all of these problems are being reversed by the gospel of Jesus and brought to completion in the city that is to come.

### **The Church for the City**

- ❖ Here's the bottom line: **As a Christian you should care about the city.** Now not every Christian is called to live in an urban context. I'm not implying that. But I am suggesting that every Christian be burdened for cities.
  - ▶ We've seen their potential. It's where an exponentially growing majority of the people are, especially the most needy and most open to spiritual ideas. And cities are where culture is being developed and renewed and then exported throughout the world.
    - **So if you care about people and the shape of our culture, then you should care about the city and being a church *for* the city.** Now what is that going to look like for us? We're going to keep coming back to that throughout this series.
  
- ❖ But let me leave you with one application. **I think, for the vast majority of us, our engagement with the city is mainly a one way relationship where the city serves us and our needs.** We moved into the city or commute into it in order to use the city – to gain education, training, credentials, work experience. If we plan a move into the city, it's only temporary. Only until we accumulate enough wealth to afford that dream home in the suburbs. That's what the relationship looks like. The city serves us.



- ❖ **But if we want to be a church for the city, then we need to flip that around where we end up serving the city.** That would first require us to understand our city. To identify (and identify with) the unique problems that plague our city (both physical and spiritual), and then banding together to alleviate them through acts of mercy and gospel proclamation.
  - ▶ Serving the city also means contributing to the life and development of our city whether through the arts, business, education, politics, law, medicine, community development, etc. To be *for* the city means seeking the peace and prosperity of the city. That means working for the good of our neighbors, especially their eternal good.
  
- ❖ **Here's a good way to gauge where we're at as a church. If HCC were to suddenly pack up and move and settle out in the suburbs, would the city miss us?** Would any of our neighbors in the urban community around us grieve our absence?
  - ▶ If they wouldn't even notice that we're gone, then that means we're merely a church *in* the city. We're a long ways off from being *for* the city.
    - So let's start by each of us asking ourselves, "*What will it look like for me to be for the city, to truly serve the people of Houston and seek their good and not just use the city for my good?*"