

*Foreword by Tim Keller*

**STEPHEN T. UM &  
JUSTIN BUZZARD**

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# WHY CITIES MATTER

*To God, the Culture, and the Church*

“God is moving the human community into cities. How will the church respond to this need and opportunity? With fresh insight, a compelling vision, and biblical reflection, Stephen Um and Justin Buzzard provide resources and answers to how the church can respond to this need. I’m thankful for their thoughtful contribution to this important subject!”

**Mark Reynolds**, Associate Director, Redeemer City to City

“The Bible is the story of a journey from a garden to a city. In the middle of it, it’s the story of the journey of the gospel from the city of Jerusalem to the city of Rome, transforming them both. Stephen Um and Justin Buzzard helpfully trace the journey, and prophetically show how it’s possible to be part of the story.”

**John Ortberg**, author; speaker; Senior Pastor, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, Menlo Park, California

“One can’t effectively plant or pastor a church in an urban context without first developing a theology of cities. This book will be an essential guide to discerning leaders who know that cities matter and want to engage those cities well.”

**Ed Stetzer**, President, LifeWay Research; author, *Subversive Kingdom*

“Recent years have witnessed a torrent of books on urbanization and on urban ministry. Many of these are specialist sociological studies; others are ‘how-to’ manuals so comprehensive that the Spirit of God could walk out and we’d never miss him. What has been lacking is a short, reasonably comprehensive, impassioned, and simply written survey of the trends and issues, combined with unwavering commitment to the eternal gospel and a transparent love for the city. Whether or not you agree with all its details, this book supplies what has been lacking. Written by two younger pastors on opposite sides of the country who share their devotion to Christ and their years of fruitful ministry, this book is neither sociology nor manual (though it has some features of both), but a clarion call to Christians to look at cities with fresh eyes and cry, ‘Give me this mountain!’”

**D. A. Carson**, Research Professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“If you care about your city, the gospel, and the future of Christianity, I highly recommend you read this insightful book by Justin Buzzard and Stephen Um. This book should be required text for anyone doing ministry in today’s world.”

**Stew Stewart**, Founder and Director, Verge Network;  
Pastor of Strategic Innovation, Austin Stone Community Church

“As cities go, so goes the world. We don’t just need more Christians in cities, we need better Christians who love where they live. This book shows the importance of cities and faithful city dwellers for the advancement of the gospel in the twenty-first century.”

**Darrin Patrick**, Lead Pastor, The Journey, St. Louis, Missouri;  
author, *For the City and Church Planter: The Man, the Message, the Mission*

“It’s only a matter of time. If you’re a true follower of Jesus, very soon you will be a happy urbanite in a city called New Jerusalem. This book is a call to get a jumpstart on that civic future now, as we labor to secure an eternal city for others. We need Christians wherever there are people—rural, urban, and suburban—but urbanization is happening so quickly worldwide that the church is in need of a special summons to the cities. These two pastors from Boston and the Bay helped renew my sense of call to the Twin Cities, and likely will do the same for you in your locale—or be the catalyst for some new civic venture God is moving you toward in our increasingly urban world.”

**David Mathis**, executive editor, [desiringGod.org](http://desiringGod.org); elder, Bethlehem Baptist Church, Twin Cities, Minnesota

“Given the fact that more and more people are moving back to cities instead of away from them, a lot of books are being published on how the twenty-first-century church can reach the urban centers of the world. My friends Justin Buzzard and Stephen Um contribute to this necessary and strategic conversation by writing a book on *why* it’s important to focus on cities. In the face of solid research that proves how culture-shaping cities are, Stephen and Justin call for missionary-mindedness—grounding that call, not in law-laden guilt, but in the radical done-ness of the gospel.”

**Tullian Tchividjian**, Pastor, Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida; author, *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*

“You don’t need to live in a city to read this book. You don’t even need to love the city to read this book. But you do need to know God loves the city, so the church should, too. Stephen Um and Justin Buzzard don’t shy away from the problems of the city as they offer a hopeful and compelling agenda for the church in our urban future.”

**Collin Hansen**, editorial director, The Gospel Coalition; coauthor, *A God-Sized Vision: Revival Stories That Stretch and Stir*

“Stephen Um and Justin Buzzard have done the church a great service in providing a clear and compelling argument not only for the importance of cities in our times, but more especially why cities matter to the church. They do a terrific job in teasing out a rich biblical theology of cities that roots their cultural analysis in a thoughtful and faithful framework. After reading the book, I wanted to call a real estate agent and tell them to find me a place in the city. It is not only where the ‘cultural action’ is today, but also where there is such a desperate need for thoughtful, faithful, and vibrant ministry. Um and Buzzard show us that cities are not to be shunned but loved with the full breath of the gospel. You will not be able to think about cities in the same old ways after reading this book.”

**Richard Lints**, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

*“Why Cities Matter* drips with passion, not for cities primarily, but for the gospel and its spread in this world. Teeming with people, cities are strategic contexts for gospel living and gospel spreading. While urban church planting is a growing trend in many quarters of American evangelicalism today, the influx of people to major cities is growing even faster. Through this book, urban pastors will be steeled and reinvigorated in their calling, many future church planters will make a run for a city, and some suburban churches (like mine, I hope) will take their next church plant downtown. But this book is not just for current city-lovers and future urban church planters—neither is it just for pastors. Whatever your present or future context, this book will challenge you to think more strategically about your dwelling, vocation, and church for the cause of Christ in this world.”

**Ryan Kelly**, Pastor for Preaching, Desert Springs Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico; Council Member, The Gospel Coalition



*Why Cities Matter: To God, the Culture, and the Church*

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# FOREWORD

*Tim Keller*

Every week it seems I read more authors and scholars pointing to the increasing importance of cities, and arguing that the future of the world will be forged there. Jim Clifton, CEO and Chairman of Gallup, points to the shrunken GDP (gross domestic product) of the United States and the vast shortfall in new job creation. What is the solution? He writes,

If you were to ask me, "From all the data you have studied so far, where will the next breakthrough, such as Internet-based everything, come from?" my answer would be: from the combination of the forces within big cities, great universities, and [their] powerful local leaders. . . . The cornerstone of these three is cities . . . [as] goes the leadership of the top 100 American cities, so goes the country's economic future.<sup>1</sup>

Recently *The Guardian* newspaper in Great Britain did a special issue, "The Future of Cities." One writer opined, "Just 10 years ago, cities were seen as vital contributors to the global economy. That's no longer true. Today, cities *are* the global economy . . . the 40 largest cities, or mega-regions, account for two-thirds of the world's output."<sup>2</sup> The issue presented the following statistics:

- According to the United Nations, almost 180,000 people move into cities across the world every day. That is nearly 5.5 million people a month, or a new San Francisco Bay Area being created every 30 days.
- Fifty percent of Africa's population will be urban by 2050. The figure currently is 38 percent.
- In the next 20 years, China's cities will add an additional 350 million people to their current population, more than the entire population of the United States.

- Twenty-two percent of the world's population lives in 600 cities, and these 600 cities generate 60 percent of the world's GDP.
- There are currently 23 megacities with over 10 million in population; by 2025 there will be 36.<sup>3</sup>

The journal *Foreign Policy* did a special issue on cities near the end of 2010, announcing, “The age of nations is over. The new urban age has begun.” The lead article announced, “The 21st century will not be dominated by America or China, Brazil or India, but by the city. In an age that appears increasingly unmanageable, cities rather than states are becoming the islands of governance on which the future world order will be built. . . . Neither 19th-century balance-of-power politics nor 20th-century power blocs are useful in understanding this new world. Instead, we have to look back nearly a thousand years, to the medieval age in which cities such as Cairo and Hangzhou were the centers of global gravity, expanding their influence confidently outward in a borderless world.”<sup>4</sup>

Albert Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, KY, read through the 2010 special report—“The Future of Cities”—by the *Financial Times*, and he responded with some strong language.

This much is clear—the cities are where the people are. In the course of less than 300 years, our world will have shifted from one in which only 3 percent of people live in cities, to one in which 80 percent are resident in urban areas. If the Christian church does not learn new modes of urban ministry, we will find ourselves on the outside looking in. The Gospel of Jesus Christ must call a new generation of committed Christians into these teeming cities. As these new numbers make clear, there really is no choice.<sup>5</sup>

As most readers can see, all of these claims about the crucial importance of the city come from wildly divergent voices. Jim Clifton's book is intensely pro–United States and pro-business. His dominating concern is that America maintains its fast-eroding economic leader-

ship in the world. *The Guardian*, *Financial Times*, and *Foreign Policy* are secular British and international publications—not at all conservative in their outlook—and are interested in not only economics, but the future of politics and culture. Al Mohler is a seminary president. His concern is the mission of the church. He wants to take the gospel to the world in such a way that it can have the greatest impact and see the most people converted.

Completely different people and different concerns. And yet, remarkably, they all agree on the crucial importance of cities. They all argue that “as cities go, so goes the world,” and that to go to cities is necessary for anyone who wants to have an impact on how life is lived in this world.

This is especially true for those, like Al Mohler, who want to win as many as possible to Christ. Christians, particularly in America, are generally negative toward cities. Several mission executives have told me over the years that we need to send missionaries to the fast growing cities of the world (as well as to the regenerating cores of Western cities), but very few American Christians have lived in urban centers or even like them. We need churches everywhere there are people, but the people of the world are moving into the great cities of the world *much* faster than the church is. And therefore we must call Christians to better understand and care for cities, and we must call more Christians to consider living and ministering in cities.

This book by my friends Stephen Um and Justin Buzzard addresses all of these concerns. It not only makes a case for “why cities matter” but also helps readers understand the distinct ways in which cities operate, and how ministry and life can thrive there. I’m delighted that both of these men are bringing their wisdom and experience to bear on this issue. They have produced a volume that is accessible yet biblically and theologically well grounded. Learn from it. Enjoy it!



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## *Stephen Um:*

Much appreciation is due to the session of Citylife Presbyterian Church (Boston, MA). Their love for our church and city, as well as their personal support, propelled this book into publication.

Tim Keller's fingerprints are all over this book. As a dear friend and mentor for many years, he has influenced my understanding of the city more than anyone. Thankfully, he not only shaped my thinking, but also helped me to grow in my love for cities. Thanks, Tim.

Similarly, my colleagues at Redeemer City to City have taught me much about cities. I am indebted to Terry Gyger, Jay Kyle, Mark Reynolds, Al Barth, John Thomas, and Gary Watanabe for the ways in which they have increased my love for cities throughout the world.

The ongoing partnership in the gospel that I share with Mark Younger and his family is a consistent source of encouragement. His burden for the gospel and cities is exemplary. Thank you, Mark.

I would like to thank my personal assistant, Justin Ruddy, who has owned this project from the very beginning. His theological insights were extremely important in formulating the overall argument for the book. I could not ask for a better ministry partner than Justin.

Finally, and most importantly, my wife Kathleen, along with my three daughters, is just as much responsible for the origination of this book as I am. Having lived in New York City for many years, she developed a love for cities way before I did. Her wisdom is woven into the fabric of this book. Your endurance, love, and support allowed me the time and space to write *Why Cities Matter*. Your perseverance and care have resulted in what I hope will be a small contribution in helping people gain a greater appreciation and love for cities.

## *Acknowledgments*

### ***Justin Buzzard:***

I want to thank my city and my church for helping me write this book.

As I live life in Silicon Valley alongside the people of Garden City Church, I'm learning so much about following Jesus and impacting our city for Jesus. Silicon Valley is an exciting and dynamic place to live; it challenges me every week. And Garden City Church is a thrilling church to lead—our wonderful people, difficult mission, and the weight of leadership both bless me and stretch me every week. I'm excited about the lifetime of learning I have ahead of me. Most days I feel like an ambitious and eager kindergartner headed to his first day of school. I have so much to learn about life in our city, and I can't wait to learn it.

At night I often dream about the great work God could do in our city and in the great cities of our world. I pray this book stirs you to dream big and pray big about what God might do in your city.

# INTRODUCTION

The city is more important than ever. Right now, more people live in cities than at any other time in human history. Never before has the majority of the world's population been an urban population.

Cities have always played a central role in human history. Cities have long stood as powerful places of cultural development, influence, and invention—offering hope, refuge, and new beginnings. But never before have cities been as populated, powerful, and important as they are today.

The world is changing. Our world is experiencing the largest movement of urban growth in history. Our world is now predominantly urban, and there's no going back. This new reality, this new world, presents a historic opportunity for Christians.

Cities shape the world. What happens in cities doesn't stay in cities. What happens in cities spreads—as the city goes, so goes the broader culture. Think of cities like you think of a factory. What is produced in the factory (city) gets shipped outside the factory and distributed throughout the world. The products shipped by the factory shape life far beyond the walls of the factory. Cities ship and shape. Cities are important because they possess a far greater “shipping” and “shaping” power than any other human settlement, such as a suburban community or a country village.

Cities are the center of cultural and economic development in our twenty-first-century world. Cities produce the people, economic resources, businesses, art, universities, political policies, and research and development—the cultural goods—that shape and define our modern society. What happens in London or Hong Kong today will affect the American financial market more than what happens in the suburbs of Chicago. Tomorrow's technological innovation in Silicon

Valley will soon impact Manila, Tokyo, and Cape Town, along with their respective countries and neighboring communities.

Cities no longer shape just their surrounding regions—they now shape the whole world. This new world presents Christians and the church with an unprecedented opportunity to bring the gospel of Jesus Christ into every dimension of human life.<sup>1</sup> God is doing something new and big in our cities, and he's calling some of us to participate in it.

It is our opinion that books about the city have often misunderstood and misrepresented the city. Much Christian literature about the city has focused merely on inner-city problems (crime, the homeless, etc.) and how an urban ministry might fix these problems, rather than providing a comprehensive analysis of the city. Intentionally or unintentionally, cities have been portrayed as places of problem, rather than places of opportunity and blessedness. The reality is bigger and more beautiful than what the evangelical portrayal has typically shown—the city is a wonderful, dynamic, exciting, and healthy place for people to live, work, and make a difference. The default definition with which many Christians seem to have grown up—“cities are uncomfortable, congested places filled with crime, grime, and temptation”—is a definition we hope to dislodge and disinfect throughout this book.<sup>2</sup>

Cities are diverse, dense places where different types of people interact with one another. Cities are populated with people of various cultures, different worldviews, and different vocations. Cities force individuals to refine their cultural assumptions, religious beliefs, and sense of calling as they rub up against the sharp edges of the assumptions, beliefs, and expertise of other city dwellers. A twenty-something from a small, white, upper-middle-class, churchgoing Midwestern suburb who has a desire to teach high school students meets a tremendous opportunity for growth when he moves into center-city Boston. He will become a new type of teacher when he holds his first day of class and finds students of every conceivable race, culture, social standing, and worldview. Encounters take place in cities that do not take place elsewhere.



Cities are not places of sameness. Nothing ever stays the same in cities. There is constant movement. With the majority of the world's population now living in cities, cities are places where the world's population gathers to do life, business, and education. This rich, diverse DNA of the city creates an environment where tremendous culture making can take place. Though this environment can also lead to idol making and cultural pride, the city has always been central to God's plans for his people. The city stands as one of our great hopes for renewing our broken world.

Because the Bible's first reference to a city is a city built by Cain the fugitive (Gen. 4:17), we tend to think that cities are an unfortunate product of the fall. This assumption is the result of a misreading of the Bible's story line. The Bible teaches that the city is God's idea, invention, and intention.

Our triune God created man and woman in his image to be representatives of his presence on earth. After creating the first man and woman, God commissioned them with a vocation to fulfill. In essence, God called upon humanity to continue doing what God himself had been doing—to create. God gave man and woman the Cultural Mandate—a calling to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth, and to cultivate and develop the garden. This mandate was ultimately an urban mandate, a call to create settlements where people could live and work together to be fruitful, to multiply, to develop, to cultivate, and to flourish.

The city is a natural and intended outgrowth of the flourishing community that our triune God has always enjoyed with himself as Father, Son, and Spirit, and of the culture-making mandate he gave to the first human settlers. When God's Son came to the earth, he took up residence in an earthly city. And when Jesus returns to the earth, he will bring with him a new city, a "holy city" where God and man will dwell together (Revelation 21). The Bible invites some of us to be city people, to engage our cities just as Jesus did, to make meaningful contribution to the commerce and culture of our cities.

People tend to adopt one of two approaches to the city. Some people retreat from the city. Thinking cities are dangerous and intimidating places, they venture into the city only when it's absolutely necessary for them to do so. Other people use the city. Thinking cities are exciting and beneficial places, they use the city to gain all they can—be it wealth, credentials, work experience, a change of scenery, or a tourist's sampling of various cultural goods.

The Scriptures invite us to relate to the city in an uncommon way. The Bible invites us to engage, to settle down in, and to contribute to our cities (Jeremiah 29). Instead of retreating from our cities, we're encouraged to understand and engage with what is happening in the city. Instead of touring our cities, we're invited to put roots down into our cities. Instead of merely taking from our cities, we're invited to contribute to the life and development of our city—be it through art, business, law, literature, music, medicine, education, finance, etc. The Bible's invitation is for us to seek the common good of our city. It's a countercultural call. It's a call to see the city as our home, and to take good care of it.

The cities of our world are growing in size and influence, and they stand in need of thoughtful Christians and churches to take up residence in them. If our culture is to be renewed with the gospel, if our world is to be restored, then we must reach our cities.

We live in a unique moment in history. At no other time in history has our world looked so similar to the setting of the early church. Read the book of Acts and you read about a world that looks much like our own—an urban, pluralistic, cosmopolitan, diverse, dynamic, rapidly changing, and fast-developing world. Two thousand years ago, God built his church through cities. The book of Acts is a story about the geographic expansion of the gospel through cities. Jerusalem, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome represent where the gospel was preached, disciples were made, and churches were established. These cities became healthier communities because Christians were there.

These cities were engaged strategically so that surrounding re-

gions could be reached. Today's world is similar, only today if you reach a city then you reach the world. Never before has the majority of the world's population been a city population. Never before have urban centers held such significance and power. What we're witnessing is both similar to and grander than the world inhabited by the early church. The opportunity is staggering. What God did two thousand years ago is something that God can do again today. In fact, God can do something even greater in our day—for he is God, and our cities offer tremendous potential for gospel growth.

We don't say this lightly or approach this moment casually. We've written this book as practitioners. We are putting to the test everything we've written here. We're both church planters leading churches in influential cities, and we've banked our livelihood on God and his power to do a redeeming work in our respective cities.

Aside from our shared love for the gospel, cities, and the church, and the fact that we're both tall, we don't have much else in common. Everything else about us is different, and we believe this is a strength in coauthoring a book like this—we both write as practitioners, but as practitioners with different life experiences.

Stephen is from the East Coast; Justin is from the West Coast. Stephen lives in Boston—the academic hub of the world; Justin lives in Silicon Valley—the innovation hub of the world. Stephen is an Asian-American who understands the intrinsic challenges of being part of a minority culture; Justin is a white-American who grew up as a member of the majority culture. Stephen is in his mid-forties; Justin is in his early thirties. Stephen has led a thriving Presbyterian church in center-city Boston for ten years; Justin, after ten years of pastoral ministry, just planted a nondenominational church in the heart of Silicon Valley that's only a year old. Stephen wears suits; Justin wears T-shirts. Stephen has three daughters; Justin has three sons. On and on we could go.

In short, we are good friends who are excited about what God is doing in our world's cities. We wrote this book with the hope that oth-

ers would see and share in this strategic work that is increasingly city-centered, so that more and more believers might have a deep vision for a global movement of the gospel in cities.

Here's where we're headed in the coming pages. The first chapter seeks to answer the question, "*What* is the importance of cities in our world today?" We consider the past, present, and future of cities, along with some basic categories for identifying a city. Chapter 2 looks at the way that cities function, and asks, "*Why* do cities play such a crucial role in our world?" We find that there are several common characteristics that explain the cultural prominence of cities in our world today. The crucial task of determining what the Bible says about cities is taken up in chapter 3. Then, in the last three chapters, we consider various issues that face those seeking to minister in our world's cities: chapter 4 looks at the topic of contextualization; chapter 5 explores how we should relate to our city's dominant story line; and chapter 6 thinks through the development of a ministry vision for your city.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF CITIES

What will be remembered about the twenty-first century . . . is the great, and final, shift of human populations out of rural, agricultural life and into cities. We will end this century as a wholly urban species.<sup>1</sup>

Doug Saunders

## A VIEW FROM THE CITY

It's ten o'clock on a Sunday morning. A PhD student at one of the top research universities in the world swipes her subway card and hops on a Red Line subway train headed for center-city Boston. As she does, she leaves the fifth-highest-ranked school in America, home to seventy-seven past and present Nobel Prize Laureates.<sup>2</sup> Had she gone two stops in the opposite direction she would have found herself at Harvard. But she's headed for center city to worship with her church. Crossing the Charles River, she gets off at the next stop to connect with a friend who is just finishing a twenty-four-hour shift. He's an endocrinology resident at Massachusetts General Hospital, one of the oldest, most respected hospitals in America.<sup>3</sup> A professing skeptic, he's a bit uncomfortable with organized religion, but the apparent normality of two Christian coworkers has made him more open to conversations about faith. Together, they ride one more stop to Park Street Station, walk through the oldest public park in America (Boston Common),<sup>4</sup> skim the edge of the historic Theater District, and take an elevator to the sixth floor of a hotel, where they're just in time for corporate worship at a church planted only ten years ago.

Surgeons, lawyers, psychiatrists, athletes, musicians, teachers,

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investors, venture capitalists, professors, bakers, engineers, nurses, entrepreneurs, techies, and students en route to an even wider variety of vocations—all are gathered from around the city to hear and interact with the gospel. They come from a wide variety of ethnic, religious, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Many are new Christians. Nearly one out of every five is a confessing skeptic investigating the claims of the Christian faith. At the close of the service they will disperse throughout the city. Some will walk a few blocks for a meal in Chinatown; others will rush to Fenway Park to see the first pitch of an early afternoon Red Sox game. The city pulses with the energy of theater and live music, bustling shopping districts and booming financial centers, along with innovation and creativity that continually lead to breakthroughs in medicine, technology, and the arts.

Additional landmarks, hospitals, universities, and companies could be referenced, but perhaps more remarkable than these highlights themselves is the fact that they are all packed snugly into a two-mile radius that approximately 225,000 people call home.<sup>5</sup> Even more, this radius is simply a part of a larger city. It acts as the hub of the greater Boston area—home to 4.6 million people.<sup>6</sup> What is it that gives this small patch of land such prominence? What led to such concentration of power and influence? Why the centralization of innovation and creativity? To answer these questions is to get at what it is that makes cities so vitally important on a variety of levels.

And so, in this chapter we hope to explore these and other questions about just *what* it is that makes cities important. What is their place in our world today? What role have cities played in our history? Will cities significantly shape our future? What opportunities and challenges do gospel churches face in cities? Difficult questions, yes, but necessary and exciting, nonetheless.

Remarkably, what we have described in Boston is not a unique phenomenon. We see people crowding together in cities more often than not. This happens throughout the world, and often on a much larger scale. It would seem that humans have a propensity for crowd-

ing together in densely populated, energy filled cities, even when wide-open, livable places are available and accessible. And, when we crowd together, big things happen. “On a planet with vast amounts of space, we choose cities.”<sup>7</sup>

As we proceed in this chapter we’ll consider the history of cities, projections about our cities, and just what it is that makes a city a city.

## **THE PAST LIFE OF CITIES**

In some sense, humans have always crowded together in cities. From the early chapters of Genesis, people are seen to be city builders. Within a generation of leaving the garden of Eden, humankind was building cities. This shows that city building has always been a part of our nature (Gen. 4:17). And when we look to broader world history, we find that cities have long been with us; they have always held an important place in human culture.

Though the particulars of the origins of the city are somewhat hazy (just as the details of early human history are hazy), we do know that religion was essential to all early settlements. Primitive urban societies are best characterized as shrine city-states.<sup>8</sup> No matter the society or religion, priestly classes were instrumental in the establishment of the first urban settlements, and religious structures were consistently found at the center of the earliest cities. Wrapped up with a culture’s religion were its commerce, politics, and power. In other words, the things that make a city a city—a place that is “sacred, safe, and busy”<sup>9</sup>—were initially developed and managed by religious leaders and institutions. This central role of religion has led urbanists to view it as the prime, organizing principle for the first cities—“the city’s ultimate reason for existence.”<sup>10</sup> The earliest examples of such shrine city-states date to around 5000 BC. Though much smaller than the modern megacities to which we have referred, all of the essential ingredients of an urban society were in place.<sup>11</sup>

Following this embryonic stage, cities developed on a much larger scale and at a faster pace. The first major wave of urbanization began

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with the rise of imperial cities that functioned as capital cities for larger states and empires.<sup>12</sup> Babylon would be the first of these cities to ascend to legendary status. Readers of the Bible will know it as the primary foe of the city and people of God (Jeremiah 20–21; Revelation 18). Also crucial was Alexander the Great’s imperial vision that led to the development of Seleucia, Antioch, and “the first . . . universal city, the supreme Hellenistic melting pot”—Alexandria.<sup>13</sup> However, the greatest achievement of this initial wave of urbanization was the first megacity: Rome.

As readers of biblical and church history know, the capital city of the Roman Empire played a crucial role in world history. It would continue to be the dominant city on the urban horizon until near the end of the fifth century AD, when the fall of Rome would leave Constantinople as the only remaining imperial city. Following Rome’s fall, cities developed throughout the Eastern world in places like China and Egypt, but the Western world experienced the Dark Ages.<sup>14</sup> It is no coincidence that the darkest period of Western history coincides with the relative absence of cities. Without the safety, economy, and sacred space of developing urban centers, individuals were left to fend for themselves—decline was to be expected.

The second major wave of urbanization occurred in the middle to late Medieval era, when population, commerce, culture, and education were on the rise in European cities like Paris, Venice, and Milan.<sup>15</sup> In these growing cities, religion continued to be a centralizing structure; “at the heart of the medieval city was the cathedral.”<sup>16</sup> Yet, this was also a period of transition, when commerce began to emerge as a new organizing structure for cities.<sup>17</sup> New social and economic freedoms led to the growth of cities, and then naturally to the questioning of the reigning religious power structure: the Catholic Church. It was at the height of this wave of urbanization that the Protestant Reformation occurred. It was “a uniquely urban event.”<sup>18</sup> With the invention of the printing press, tracts and Bibles spread throughout densely populated cities and towns. The reaffirmation of the priesthood of all believers,



along with the validation of secular vocation, created a new ethic for urban life—one that would help pave the way for urban advancements in technology, production, and social life for future centuries.<sup>19</sup>

What came next in the historical life of cities? On the heels of expanding religious freedoms, growing commercial markets, and the questionable colonization of vast parts of India, Africa, and South America came the third wave of urbanization: the industrial city. Propelled by the Industrial Revolution's innovations in machinery, transportation, and production methods, on the whole, the population and wealth of cities exploded. By default, commerce became the new center of the city. Modern-day urban giants like London and New York had their major boons in this period.<sup>20</sup> By the early twentieth century, the phenomenon of the industrial city had spread around the globe, leading to the incredible growth of cities like Tokyo, Berlin, and St. Petersburg.<sup>21</sup> However, along with this urban progress came urban decay. Because cities function as a magnifying glass for humanity, displaying our best and worst potential, one might argue that the grand scale of the atrocities of the twentieth century was partly dependent on the grand scale of the cities in which they took place. Furthermore, the industrial city was simply not sustainable. A look at industrial cities like Detroit and Buffalo, which to this point have had difficulty re-inventing themselves, shows us that a city will not thrive if it places a higher premium on material production than human innovation.

Cities have been with us since the beginning. But will they remain? Will all cities ultimately follow the path of slow decline that we see in many industrial cities? Or does recent history give us reason to hope that cities on the whole are on an upward trajectory? Where do we presently stand, and where are we headed?

## **THE PRESENT LIFE OF CITIES AND OUR URBAN FUTURE**

As you read this book, we find ourselves in the middle of the fourth and greatest wave of urbanization; it is being identified as the era of the megacity, the megalopolis, the postcolonial city, and the global city.

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Today's reality is that cities are larger, more diverse, more powerful, more innovative, and more global than ever, and they are advancing faster than they have ever done in the past. From Shanghai to Moscow, London to Mumbai, New York to Seoul, São Paulo to Cairo, the world has never been more urban. Humanity's march toward the city has reached a new benchmark. In 1900 only 14 percent of the world's population lived in urban areas; that number had grown to 30 percent by 1950. In 2008 the world's population was evenly split between urban and rural areas, but in 2011 the world became predominantly urban.<sup>22</sup> The numbers are even more striking in developed areas where, on average, 74 percent of the population lives in urban areas.<sup>23</sup>

The facts about our present situation are undeniable, but questions naturally arise: Is the massive scale of urbanization accidental, or has a pattern emerged that will continue to shape our world in the coming years? Have cities reached their peak, leaving the pendulum to swing back toward a rural, agrarian society? Or will the momentum of urbanization move us into a future that is increasingly urban?

While prognostications have no sway over the future, "the most reliable predictions are those that follow established trends."<sup>24</sup> In this regard, the undeniable trends of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have led researchers, with few known exceptions, to conclude that in the twenty-first century and beyond, our world will become increasingly urban. For example, the UN Population Division's massive study on World Population Prospects suggests that by 2050 the world will be 68.7 percent urban.<sup>25</sup> In more developed regions, the number is likely to reach 86.2 percent.<sup>26</sup> Amazingly, "by mid-century, the world urban population will likely be the same size as the world's total population was in 2004."<sup>27</sup> These predictions are astounding in describing the urban shape of our future.

The growth is charted to occur on the largest scale in the developing world. In Asia for instance, between 2009 and 2050, cities will move from representing 41 percent of the population to 64 percent. Essentially, rural populations will decrease by approximately 531 mil-

lion, while urban populations will increase by 1.67 billion.<sup>28</sup> Further evidence of this coming shift can be found in China's recent transition to becoming a majority urban nation.<sup>29</sup> In many respects this is something to celebrate, particularly in light of the fact that "there is a near-perfect correlation between urbanization and prosperity across nations."<sup>30</sup> Of course, new challenges and problems will emerge, but cities have a unique way of creating solutions to their problems. Our world's economic wealth, technological innovation, and cultural development are based in part on the city's ability to examine its own urban condition. And there is no reason to believe that cities will fail to generate answers to their questions.

In short, all signs point to a *very* urban future. What do we need to know about cities in order to live well in this future? What should we make of the increasing concentration of power in urban centers? What makes cities so influential in our culture? What kind of opportunities does major urbanization present for the spread of the gospel? The rest of the chapter will seek to answer some of these questions, while giving big categories on which to hang our thoughts about the structure, meaning, and purpose of cities.

## **THE MAKINGS OF A CITY**

The past, present, and potential future show us that cities are dynamic communities, which come in numerous shapes and sizes. What they all share in common is a large number of people freely choosing to dwell closely with one another. This is the essence of cities: cities emerge when people choose to live, work, and play in close proximity to one another. Edward Glaeser's definition is helpful here: "Cities are the absence of physical space between people. . . . They are proximity, density, closeness."<sup>31</sup> He would even go so far as to claim that "cities are people."<sup>32</sup> We think he's right.

If cities are people choosing to live in close proximity to one another, what reasons can be given for why human beings choose to do this more often than not? Joel Kotkin, author of *The City: A Global*

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*History*, suggests three overarching categories for understanding what leads people to create cities: they keep us *safe*, they keep us *social*, and they shape our understanding and awareness of the *sacred*.<sup>33</sup> To put it another way, cities are centers of power, culture, and spirituality. In what follows, we will develop these three categories as we seek to answer the question, *what makes a city a city?*

### *Cities Are Centers of Power*

History shows that one of the driving forces behind the advent of the city was the need for safety. Speaking about the earliest examples of cities, Harvie Conn links this notion of refuge with the idea of the city as the seat of power:<sup>34</sup> “Its walls marked it as protector . . . whether small or large the city-state was the anvil of civilization, the center of power.”<sup>35</sup> In short, the search for safety in a lawless world led people to band together to create structures that would keep them safe. Walls, militaries, laws, government, and commerce are important elements of a safe human society, and they were all developed by cities. Today, these structures and their descendants are the means by which power is measured.

It is true that most members of developed societies have ceased to think of cities as places of refuge and safety, but the constant movement of immigration to developed cities by persons from less developed regions suggests that cities continue to play this role in our world. The opportunity to live in a well-governed society, to earn a reasonable wage, and to dwell in a well-built residence, continues to lead millions of individuals to leave their rural homes for the world’s cities. In many ways, urbanization is the result of migration to centers of power.<sup>36</sup>

When the structures are set in place for the proliferation of safety, wealth, and good governance, cities thrive. Using the United States as an example, it is no surprise that the center of its government and defense spawned a city (Washington, DC). Nor should it shock us that all of its other major cities grew up around the potential for economic

gain (New York, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, etc.). People flock to cities for safety and refuge. They remain in cities to gain proximity to these power structures, and once people settle into cities then they think of ways to make meaningful contribution to their advancement.

A look at the economic importance of cities is just one way of measuring the concentration of power in urban places. According to Richard Florida, “In the United States, more than 90 percent of all economic output is produced in metropolitan regions, while just the largest five metro regions account for 23 percent of it.”<sup>37</sup> On a global scale, the world economy is driven largely by forty metropolitan megaregions. The top ten megaregions, home to just 6.5 percent of the world’s population, produce 43 percent of the world’s economic output.<sup>38</sup> Remarkably, the economic output of a highly developed megacity like New York eclipses the entire economic output of developing countries like Mexico and India.<sup>39</sup> It is true that in discussing the concentration of economic output we cannot avoid the issues of inequality and poverty. However, as we will see in chapter 2, cities do not make people poor, but rather they attract poor people because they offer greater opportunities for escaping poverty.<sup>40</sup> “For most people, cities are the solution, not the problem.”<sup>41</sup>

In pointing out these astonishing numbers, we simply hope to illustrate the level of concentrated influence and power that is present in cities. We are not saying that Christian mission should be defined by the power structures of our day. In fact, if the gospel is present in our cities, it will not shy away from challenging the prevailing abuses and misuses of power. Nor are we saying that places with higher economic output have more intrinsic value than others, or are more qualified recipients of the gospel. Rather, we hope that we’ve been able simply to illustrate the importance of cities in our world today. As centers of power that provide safety, government, and economic opportunity, cities will continue to be magnets for an increasing majority of the world’s population. The question is, will gospel churches and Christians be present when the world arrives in the city?

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If the concentration of power is one mark of a city, another is the centralization of cultural capital.

### *Cities Are Centers of Culture*<sup>42</sup>

When we ask the question, “What is it that makes cities important?” a major theme that quickly emerges is that cities are centers of culture. To understand this, all one needs to do is consider the shape of everyday life. For example, in the Western world, popular music tends to be created, produced, and performed in cities before extending its reach into everyday life in the suburbs. Even the majority of country music, which often romantically glorifies small-town life by poking fun at city living, is produced in a city (Nashville). The same can be said about television and film (Los Angeles, Mumbai), fashion (New York, Paris, Milan), technology (Silicon Valley, Tokyo), and education (Boston). Want to see the best in live theater? You’ll have to go to the nearest urban center. Your favorite sports team? It’s located in a city. The best symphony, museums, research, world-class restaurants? They are almost always in cities. Your cell phone, e-reader, computer, household appliances, and car? Again, likely designed or produced in cities.<sup>43</sup>

Why stack up all of these examples? Is this just city propaganda? No. We don’t think so. Whether you find yourself cheering for cities, or feeling suspicious of them, the reality is that they are the primary shapers of the culture in which we live. If you have adopted any of the conveniences of our modern culture, you are not only the beneficiary but also a dependent recipient of the culture that is produced in cities. And so to eliminate the city is to eliminate culture—*your* culture. Conversely, to enter the city is to enter the culture’s creative engine.

What we’re suggesting here is a move beyond the typical dichotomous approach (“city v. suburbs”) of understanding the importance of cities. That distinction has been unhelpful for as long as it has dominated discussions about cities and the regions that develop around them. What we might consider, instead, is a more robust understanding of the interplay that exists between cities and nonurban com-

munities. Take, for instance, Kotkin's recent article, "Why America's Young and Restless Will Abandon Cities for Suburbs."<sup>44</sup> There he suggests that a significant number of the twenty-five- to thirty-four-year-olds that make up a typical urban population will move out to the suburbs by the time they become thirty-five- to forty-four-year-olds. The proposed reason for this move is that "when 20-somethings get older, they do things like marry, start businesses, settle down and maybe start having kids." Fair enough. But the question is, how do we process and respond to this information?

If we approach this thesis from one side of the "city v. suburbs" debate, we may find ourselves saying, "Aha! The city is not on the rise after all. The majority of people will end up in the suburbs in the end." The other side might bemoan the flight of the privileged, or simply look down on those who have cast their vote for sprawl. However, a more reasonable view is that there is a dialogue or interplay that exists between city and suburb, and that this piece of the dialogue actually goes further in making the case for "city as the center of culture" than any other.

Not only do the suburbs receive culture shaped by the city, they receive *people* shaped by the city. And, though they have relocated to the suburbs, these individuals likely work in the city, are fed a cultural diet delivered to their doorstep by the city, succeed in the suburbs based on skills acquired in cities, and shape their lives and the world around them with the ideologies acquired during their formative years in the city. We can be certain that, in the midst of a global population boom with cities at its center, the world's suburbs will become increasingly influenced by the cities to which they are connected. More than ever before, it is now the case that "as the city goes, so goes the culture."<sup>45</sup>

### *Cities as Centers of Worship*

The discussion of the city's influence becomes further intensified when we consider that cities also function as centers of worship. It

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was the great urban historian Lewis Mumford who claimed that this religious element of the city preceded even the economic and physical elements. “The first germ of the city . . . is in the ceremonial meeting place . . . because it concentrates . . . certain ‘spiritual’ or supernatural powers, powers . . . of wider cosmic significance than the ordinary processes of life.”<sup>46</sup> The sacred aspect of the city stands “as the very reason for the city’s existence, inseparable from the economic substance that makes it possible.”<sup>47</sup> Cities are built upon the things from which humanity attempts to derive its ultimate significance. Whether centered around a mosque or a financial district, a cathedral or an entertainment sector, all cities are built in honor of and pay homage to some type of a “god.”

Many have bemoaned the advent of the skyscraper and its overshadowing visage over the traditional church steeple as signaling the demise of religion.<sup>48</sup> Yet, while it is true that Western culture has increasingly distanced itself from organized religion, there is a sense in which we remain just as spiritual as ever. As authors like Tim Keller and David Powlison have reminded us, the default, irreversible mode of the human heart is worship.<sup>49</sup> As the late novelist David Foster Wallace put it, “In the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship.”<sup>50</sup> It’s not *if* you’re worshipping; it’s *what* you’re worshipping. In the same way, it’s not a question of *whether* cities are centers of worship—cities have always been built around the things that their inhabitants see as holding cosmic significance—it’s a question of *what* a city is worshipping.

World-class cities are the largest religious communities in the world by virtue of their population density alone. And what do they tend to worship? People in cities “turn to false gods, such as power, fame, possessions, privilege, and comfort.”<sup>51</sup> Consider the overarching cosmic narrative of Washington, DC: the pursuit of power. For the majority of the city’s residents, daily life is shaped by power. Whether one is running for political office, holding the keys to history in a re-



nowned museum, lobbying for a legislative shift, or maintaining and measuring military strength at the Pentagon, power is the name of the game. One might say that the order of life—the order of worship, or the urban liturgy—is determined by the “idol” of the city. This is true no matter what the idols of your city are. To adapt Greg Beale’s thesis on idolatry, a city resembles what it reveres, either for ruin or for restoration.<sup>52</sup>

The idea of the city as a center for worship becomes complicated when we consider the overwhelming number of personal narratives that are weaved into a city’s overarching story. Cities are centers of worship because they are filled to the brim with worshipers—people giving their lives away to realities they believe will fulfill them. Add to this the endless numbers of potential options for worship, and you find that city living has a unique way of fostering spiritual openness. “Cities tend to excite spiritual inquiry, both good and bad. The turmoil, the striving, and all that a city becomes seem to turn people into religious seekers.”<sup>53</sup> Cities are centers of worship filled with people who worship, and all of these worshipers are very open to finding new objects to worship.

Some may find this spiritual openness threatening, but Christians ought to find it exciting. It is precisely this kind of urban spiritual seeking that provided the context for the rapid spread of the gospel in the first century. Craig Blomberg cites the following as a major factor in the quick advance of Christianity:

A cosmopolitan spirit grew, particularly in the cities, that transcended national barriers. Old tribal distinctions and identities were breaking down, leaving people ripe for new religions or ideologies to fill the gaps. The gospel would meet many felt needs in this climate. . . . Closely related was the elimination of many cross-cultural barriers to dialogue and the dissemination of new worldviews.<sup>54</sup>

In this way, the global phenomenon of urbanization provides incredible opportunities for the spread and influence of the gospel that the

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church has not seen since its earliest days. The gospel is the one story that can rewrite all the misdirected stories that our cities are telling. It is *the* way that worship is rightly reordered and the way in which worship becomes life giving again. At bottom, the God of the gospel is who all worshipers are truly longing to find. Will they locate us, his people, in the city when they start searching for something to worship?

## CONCLUSION

We hope that you'll be able to affirm that cities are important. An honest evaluation of past and present human experiences indicates that they are unmatched as centers of power, culture, and worship. In the future, these increasingly dense and numerous human settlements will lead, shape, and provide the narratives of purpose and meaning for our world. This is true regardless of whether one lives in the heart of a thriving metropolis or on the edge of a far-reaching exurban community. The looming challenge to all Christians will be whether we will bring the gospel to bear on these centers of influence, or simply react to the effects and overflow of the city. It is our contention that the gospel compels us not only to react, but more importantly to respond winsomely and to enter into the city's cultural story with a contextualized, renewing, and reviving power of the gospel. Before plotting our response, the next step is to determine just *why* it is that cities hold this place of immense influence in our world. After having examined the importance of cities, we move now to consider their characteristics.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What preconceptions about the city did you bring with you into the first chapter of this book? How does your social location or personal background affect the way you view the city?
2. What is your gut-level reaction to the claim that our world will become increasingly urban in the years ahead? How would you deal with rapid urbanization if it reached your doorstep?

3. To what extent is it true that cities are centers of power? How often do you feel the effects of political and economic decisions that are made in cities?
4. Where do you see the direct impact of the city on your personal experience of culture? Media? Sports? A particular product? What are the implications of the urban background of the culture you consume?
5. What would it look like for your city to do away with its idols and turn to the one true God? How would your city be different if its inhabitants were driven by devotion to God rather than the selfish pursuit of wealth, fame, or power?

“Helps readers understand the distinct ways in which cities operate, and how ministry and life can thrive there.”

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“Comprehensive, impassioned, and simply-written survey of the trends and issues.”

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**John Ortberg**

## WE LIVE IN A UNIQUE MOMENT IN HISTORY.

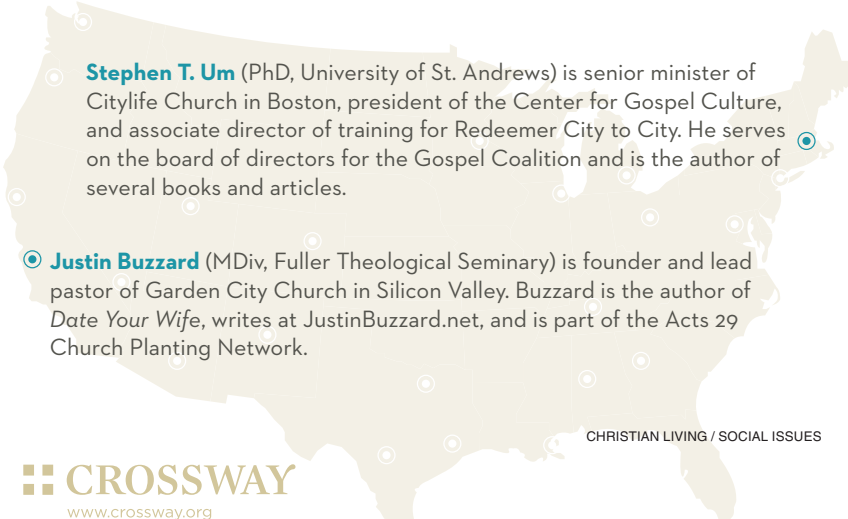
Right now, more people live in urban centers than ever before. This means that we have an unprecedented opportunity to influence the majority of the world through the church in the city!

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- Why cities are so important
- What the Bible says about cities
- How to overcome common issues and develop a plan for living missionally in the city

Instead of retreating from or taking from our cities, here is a call to make the cities our home, to take good care of them, and to participate in God’s kingdom-building work in the urban centers of our world.



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CHRISTIAN LIVING / SOCIAL ISSUES