

Paradigms for Reaching a City

By Ed Silvano.

The key to reaching an entire city for Christ is to build a canopy of prayer over the whole city, block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood, in order to change its spiritual climate through prayer evangelism.

Prayer Evangelism is talking to God about our neighbors before we talk to those neighbors about God. The biblical model for this is found in Luke 10:5-9 where we are instructed to

- Bless the lost,
- Fellowship with them,
- Take care of their needs and finally
- Proclaim the Kingdom of God to them.

Paradigm Shifts in the Church

What gives us hope to believe that cities will be reached in the immediate future is a series of significant paradigm shifts that have taken place (plus a few more that are taking place or are about to). A paradigm is a model or a pattern. An intellectual paradigm is a prism through which the mind perceives reality. A paradigm shift is a change in that model or pattern thus allowing us to see reality through a different and usually more effective grid.

Human beings had tried to fly for thousands of years with no success. In his quest, man tried every imaginable way to make the human body fly. At one point, Leonardo Da Vinci glued feathers to his entire body and, while perched on the banister of a second floor balcony, flapped his arms hoping to take off. None of this worked until the Wright brothers had a paradigm shift. They discovered that the key to flying rests on the shape of the wing. A wing that is flat on the bottom and curved on top causes air to travel faster under it thus creating an upward thrust. The moment the Wright brothers had such paradigm shift, man was able to fly. The impossible become possible.

A paradigm shift also represents a transition that is irreversible. It is like the cracking of the ice on a lake at the beginning of the Spring. Once it happens, no matter how miniscule the crack, the ice will never recover its old wholeness but it will keep cracking and breaking up until it disappears. This is why the paradigm shifts I am about to list are so significant. The church has been affected by them and it will never be the same. Some of these paradigms are not fully visible yet because they are so small, but like that first crack in the ice, since they are irreversible they are bound to get bigger and bigger, never smaller.

I have identified seventeen paradigm shifts affecting the church and our cities that fall into three categories: paradigms *in place*, paradigms *in process* and paradigms *yet to come*. I am not saying that these paradigms have been totally unknown to people in the church. In fact, through the years all of these paradigms have been embraced and espoused by different individuals. However, what is new now is that these paradigms have become, or are fast becoming, part of the church as a whole.

Paradigm Shifts Already in Place

1.- There is only one church in the city.

There are many congregations, but there is only one church. Likewise, many undershepherds but only one Chief shepherd. We still do not know how to operate as one church but we no longer doubt that there is only one church in the city and that its spiritual unity is paramount. Gone are the days when eloquent national speakers drew a huge following by using the Scriptures to point out what was wrong with other groups and why they should be avoided, and in many cases considered unchristian on account of what now an increasing number realizes are minor differences. Maintaining the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (instead of doctrine or practices) is allowing the church to discover the tremendous wealth of common truth that the different congregations share while appreciating the rich distinctives that God, in His sovereignty, has allowed to develop. One people, many tribes. Like Israel in the Old Testament the Church is one indivisible entity even though it is made up of different tribes. Those tribes are fast learning to come together for the two things that Israel always came together for: worship and warfare.

2.- Cities must be reached for Christ NOW!

Gone are the days when a congregation would send missionaries to Turkey fully convinced that they should and would reach Ankara for Christ while not believing that the city where that congregation is should also be reached for Christ.

Acts 1:8 has come into sharper focus on at least two counts:

- a) The Great Commission begins with a city and that city is the city where the reader lives.
- b) The power promised by the Lord as a result of receiving the Holy Spirit is not simply power to improve our Christian life but primarily power to reach the lost. This power flows in a centrifugal rather than centripetal way.

3.- Prayer evangelism is the key to reaching our cities for Christ.

Gone are the days when an outsider was expected to come and "reach the city". There is a deep conviction among members of the church, especially an increasing number of pastors who usually pray together regularly, that the grace to reach the city has been deposited in the city already. It is an established conviction that it will take the whole church to present the whole gospel to the whole city and that prayer evangelism is the best way to equip the saints to do such work.

4.- Identificational Repentance.

This is the ability to own the corporate sins committed by individuals in the group we belong to, to repent on its behalf and to make restitution to the injured ones. This paradigm shift, by freeing us from an excessive individualism in our understanding of sin and its consequences, is enabling the church in the city to deal effectively, and in a way that is meaningful and relevant to the injured parties, with serious iniquities such as racism and bigotry whose roots transcend our generation.

Identificational repentance is allowing the church to "lift up holy hands, without wrath and (the resulting) dissension" as it prays everywhere for everybody since God wishes all men to be saved for the simple and compelling reason that Christ gave himself in ransom for all.

5.- The Church was not born in the Upper Room but in the market place.

In the same fashion that babies are conceived in their mother's womb but are not born until they come out of it, the Church was conceived in the Upper Room but it was not born until the disciples came out of it into the market place where the word of God was first preached and 3,000 men received Christ.

This is a very important point because as long as we believe that the church was born inside four walls we will always need four walls to have a church. Worse yet, this misbelief leads to confusing the church building with the ekklesia - the gathering of believers. This paradigm shift is crucial for city reaching. To see its impact let us imagine a congregation of 1,000 members who through the week are strategically located in neighborhoods, workplaces, campuses, etc., where each member is already in a position to pastor those in his or her sphere of influence. However, when we believe that the Church and the church building are too closely associated to the point of being perceived almost as one and the same, we end up expecting those 1,000 members to invite people to come to the church building hoping that once they hear the preacher they will receive the Lord. Very few do, and those that do require significant attention and maintenance to convince them to keep coming to the building. On the other hand, if every believer were to be encouraged to implement Acts 2:42 (to have church in their circle of influence) where they are already planted by the Lord, they could soon "fill the entire city with the doctrine (of the apostles)" as was the case in Acts 5:28.

6.- Prayer is not just a private exercise but also a public one.

A study on prayer in the Scriptures shows that prayer is portrayed more often in a public setting than in a private one. This does not mean that people did not pray in private but it does mean that prayer is more public than what we have been led to believe. Furthermore, every time unbelievers were in the equation and their salvation was at stake, prayer was public as in the case of Daniel, Elisha or Jesus, when he resurrected Lazarus. Furthermore, Paul, in I Timothy 2:8-9 commands men and women to participate in public prayer meetings all over the city. This paradigm shift, along with the one before, are crucial to the essence of prayer evangelism. If we confine the church to four walls and prayer as a strictly private exercise carried out inside our prayer closet, we make prayer evangelism impossible to implement.

7.- The fold is not equal to the flock.

In John chapter 21 Jesus asked Peter if he loved him. When Peter reluctantly answered in the affirmative

Jesus instructed him to "feed my lambs." Traditionally we have interpreted this to mean that He appointed Peter as the pastor of the Church He was about to leave behind. However, this interpretation is too restrictive and in the end becomes misleading.

The lambs that need feeding are not the ones that are in the fold, but the ones outside of it, and those are the lambs that are lost. Food is always available in the fold. For instance, in the parable of the Good Shepherd, the 99 sheep are left "in the pasture," where there was plenty of food. It was the lost one that was hungry. Quite often the church has concentrated on pastoring the saints at the exclusion of the lost. What Jesus was asking Peter was to pastor His flock which is made up of the found and the lost sheep. Our mistake has been to make the fold (the church) equal to the flock (the lost people in our city). The fold is smaller than the flock. It is the church that needs to go to the city rather than the other way around. A shepherd, to be a shepherd, needs first of all a flock and once he has it, then he needs a fold to take care of it but never the other way around. If someone has a fold but not a flock such person is not a shepherd. Understanding this lays the foundation for the next paradigm shift.

8.- Pastors are called to pastor the city.

God loves the entire world. Jesus gave his life in ransom for all. God wishes all men to be saved. He wishes that none should perish. God is always inclusive when it comes to caring for the lost. More and more pastors are seeing the city, with its many clusters of lost people—schools, bars, hospitals, city hall, jails, schools, parks—as their parish. They are beginning to see that everyone is a member of the congregation (flock) entrusted to them even though most of them are not in the fold. Furthermore, they are seeing with increased clarity that like the pastor in the parable of the lost sheep, they need to prioritize the lost over the found without neglecting the latter.

A pastor in Argentina was asked how large his congregation was and he answered, "We pastor 130,000 people. Some of them are prostitutes, others homosexuals, most of them lie and cheat, but they are all under our care." He was referring to the population of his city that he and his fellow pastors have come to see as their flock.

9.- It is possible to change the spiritual climate over a city.

Traditionally we have believed that it is possible to change the spiritual climate in a home, inside the church building or in a stadium during a crusade. We know how to do it. In fact, it is done every Sunday. The climate changes dramatically as the service progresses. We already know how to change the climate. Our problem consists of not believing yet that the same climate we have in the church could and should be all over the city. This is promised in I Timothy 2:1-9 where we are told that if we pray for everybody, everywhere, we will be able to live a quiet and tranquil life in all godliness and honesty. For godliness to increase and honesty to be evident, ungodliness has to decrease and none of this can happen without visible improvements in the spiritual climate. This was evidenced in Luke 10:17-21 when the Seventy returned with joy because demons were subject to them and even Satan fell down from heaven like lightning, according to Jesus.

Let us take a moment to connect these nine paradigms into a paragraph to see the tremendous potential they contain for our city to be reached for Christ.

Picture one church in the city, fully convinced that the city can and must be reached for Christ now, and all its members doing prayer evangelism with clean hands and with no divisions because they have done identificational repentance. Now church happens all over the marketplace as public prayers are offered everywhere for everybody because pastors no longer restrict themselves to the fold but now they focus on the flock and in so doing they pastor the entire city and as a result the spiritual climate over the city changes.

Paradigm Shifts in Progress

The nine paradigm shifts just described are firmly established. The truth they reflect no longer has to be argued about. Those battles are already won. The Church has been visibly changed by these irreversible changes. The next four paradigms are more recent but they are definitely in the picture and are gradually becoming more evident.

1.- Intercession is not a spiritual gift given to some people but a characteristic common to all

Christians.

According to I Timothy 2:1-9 the entire church is instructed to pray for everybody, everywhere. In Ephesians 6:18 all the saints are told to pray at all times. We all must pray without ceasing. Even though there may be different levels and scopes of intercession, everyone is called to intercede. Why is it important to understand that everybody is an intercessor? Because if we got this far with just a few people praying, consider for a moment how much farther (and faster) we are going to get with everybody interceding.

2.- Martyrdom is not a spiritual gift given to some but a possibility on stand by for all Christians.

Our struggle is against the devil and his forces of wickedness (Ephesians 6:10-18). The secret to defeat the devil is spelled out in Revelation 12:11. In that passage we are told that the formula to defeat him consists of three parts: the blood of the Lamb, the word of our testimony and our willingness to despise our lives unto death. It is impossible to comply with the third requirement unless we are willing to die for the Lord.

In Hebrews we are told that the devil holds people captive all their lives through the fear of death. Christians need to realize that dying for and/or in the Lord is a blessing as stated in the Psalms, "Blessed is before the Lord the death of His saints." Such death is beautiful because that is when the Lord replaces our tattered tent with a house, a building not made with hands and in the best real estate in the entire universe: heaven. When this truth is understood Christians are no longer controlled by the fear of death and they now welcome the hardships and the sufferings associated with fulfilling the Great Commission. As long as we fear death and suffering our eschatology will be distorted by two fears: the fear of going through the great tribulation and the fear of the antichrist.

Why is this paradigm important? The blood of martyrs is the seed of revival, as seen through history. If Steven's martyrdom resulted in tremendous growth, including the conversion of Saul, how much more will happen when everybody in the church is willing to lay down their lives for Jesus? The Church will become invincible because it will be fearless and nothing makes a well equipped army mightier than fearlessness!

3.- All the offices listed in Ephesians chapter 4 need restoration

Historically it has been assumed by many that the prophetic ministry needed restoration and such restoration began in the 80s. Then the 90s became the decade of the apostolic restoration and quite a bit of thinking and dialogue is going on. Even though the subjects remain controversial a significant degree of light and understanding is being brought to these two offices through the ongoing research and interaction.

Unfortunately, it has been assumed that the other three offices: pastors, evangelists and teachers, do not need restoration based on the assumption that what we have today conforms to biblical standards. However, we are learning that an Ephesians 4 an evangelist is not someone with charismatic gifts who packs stadiums and preaches to multitudes or someone who enthusiastically chases sinners in bus stations or sidewalks but rather someone who "equips the saints for those saints to do the work of the ministry." These two examples portray someone who is doing the work of evangelism but not the Ephesians 4 office of evangelism. Similarly a pastor is not someone so confined to watching over believers that he will turn his attention to the lost only after they have joined his church, but rather someone who co-pastors the city with other under-shepherds because he considers the lost as much his responsibility as the saints. In the same manner, an Ephesians 4 teacher is not one who uses his or her knowledge of the Scriptures to divide and tear apart the body but one who consistently builds it up by helping the church, through his teaching gift, to major on the majors instead of on the minors.

This paradigm is significant because unless we see the need to see all five offices restored the current order will not be able to handle the new one and consequently our cities will not be reached.

4.- Loving the lost is as essential as loving God.

Jesus never quoted the greatest commandment by itself. He always presented both commands as part of a unit. He taught in no uncertain terms that we must love God and our neighbor as ourselves. In fact, in Matthew 22:37-40 a teacher of the law tried to trick him into naming just one commandment as the most important. Jesus replied by highlighting both commands and emphasizing that "on these two commandments (as opposed to only one) rest the entire law and the prophets."

This paradigm shift is crucial to reaching our cities because the love with which God loves us and that now

enables us to love Him back is the same love we already have in our hearts for our neighbors, albeit unused. We need to release it by faith. When we do it, we will see Luke 16:16 fulfilled: "everyone is forcing their way into the Kingdom." How come? Because the law and the prophets (which depends on obeying the two greatest commandments) will have been fulfilled and consequently we will be able to preach a gospel of the kingdom that appeals to everyone.

Why would it appeal to everyone? Because when we love the lost with the same intensity we love God, they feel connected to God—whom they have never seen—through our brotherly love - which they can now see. The key in this equation is our love for the lost that acts as a conduit to God and His love for them through us. When this is in place the lost cannot resist it, they want it so much that they begin to force their way into the Kingdom of God. We know this to be true at the individual level. All, or most of us, have been initially attracted to Christ through someone who "loved us into the Kingdom." Doing it citywide should produce a similar attraction except on a much greater scale.

Let us combine now these four paradigms in a paragraph as we visualize the church in our city.

Everybody in the church is an intercessor who intercedes on behalf of those that the devil is blinding to the light of the gospel and they do so with no fear of death because they have despised their lives already. This particular church is led by evangelists that equip its members to evangelize wherever they are, by pastors that shepherd the entire city, making no distinction between saints and sinners as far as commitment and care, and by teachers that expound the word of the Lord for the sole purpose of building up the body of Christ.

Four Paradigm Shifts Yet to Come

These paradigm shifts are not in place yet but when they come, they will signal the beginning of the much prayed for revival and the gathering of the Harvest.

1.- The Harvest is plentiful.

Jesus said it, so we know it is true. What we do not fully understand yet is how plentiful is plentiful. Let us agree that it has to be more than what we have now. But how much? A study of the gospels shows that every time Jesus described the harvest He always used examples indicating that fifty percent of the population would be saved. For instance, in the parable of ten virgins, five are saved and five are lost. He also told us about two men on the roof, one was taken and the other was left behind. Two thieves hang on each side of his own cross, one was saved the other was not. Each one of these examples indicates a 50% rate.

Furthermore, Jesus was always very positive about the harvest. He described it as plentiful. He painted the lost as fields white unto harvest. He was constantly followed by great multitudes. In Luke 16:16 we are told that "everyone was forcing their way into the Kingdom". None of this changed in the book of Acts where we are told of multitudes saved, entire cities filled with the doctrine of the apostles and of everyone hearing the word of the Lord. Paul reports in Romans 15:18-23 that he had no place to go to preach because he never preached where Christ had been proclaimed and there was not a single city where that had not happened between Jerusalem and Illyricum (right on the border with Italy). The epistles speak of the heart of God when they tell us that God wishes none to perish but all to come to repentance. In the book of Revelation, John tells us that the multitudes of the gentiles that was saved "could not be counted being so many."

The moment the church realizes how big the harvest is and that at least 50% of the population in our cities could be saved, it will change the way we do church. The church will cease to be a monument, confined to one place and to a physical structure, and will become once again a dynamic movement that expresses itself all over the city, everyday.

2.- The Lord's return as the motivation to fulfill the Great Commission.

In the late 50s and 60s the prevalent motivation for fulfilling the Great Commission was to plant churches, and in the 70s and 80s it was to grow them. In the 90s it gradually switched to reaching the lost wherever they are and this has resulted in creative outreaches outside of the church building . However, the highest level is yet to come: to be motivated to reach the ends of the earth by the conviction that we will see Jesus

return in glory. This was the motivation of the Early Church. The early disciples believed with a passion that Jesus was going to return in their lifetime. Even Paul said so much when he said, "and those of us who have remained..."

This is a very important paradigm because when every believer in the Church believes that Jesus is coming back soon at least two dramatic things will take place:

- Holiness. "He who has this hope purifies himself as He is pure". Holiness will increase.

- Phenomenal release of resources. When the coming of Christ controls our actions we will be moved to let go of all our resources for the sake of hastening His return. The Early Church had no problem selling their properties and putting the proceeds at the feet of the apostles because they believed Jesus would return once the ends of the earth had been reached. Besides, what was the use of property left behind once they had been raptured by the Lord?

3.- No division between clergy and laity.

This division has eliminated the corporate effectiveness of the church by confining to a few experts, by virtue of their training, the mission that belongs to everybody by reason of their calling. The Early Church was led by "untrained and uneducated people" whose only, but most effective, credential was that "they have been with Jesus." The wall that created laity and clergy is an aberration emerging from medieval times when secular governments took control of the Church, beginning with Constantine. It is true that there are offices in the church as taught in Ephesians chapter 4, but those offices exist for the equipping of the entire church to be able do what each one of those offices stands for. It should never preclude the priesthood of all believers and the fact that a city must be filled with the teaching of the apostles by Christians who minister to everybody, everywhere all week long.

4.- The whole church pastoring the whole city.

This paradigm represents the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy as quoted by Peter during the first message ever preached in the church. Old and young, male and female, free and slave. In essence, everybody is involved in ministering all over the city because the Spirit of the Lord will have been poured out upon all flesh (and that flesh dwells in the city). When this paradigm shift finally happens the Kingdom of God will come to the city.

Let us, once again, capture these four paradigms in an imaginative paragraph: the church in the city harvesting a plentiful harvest, minimum fifty percent of the population, in an environment of holiness and generosity because everybody has been purified by the hope that Jesus will return soon. Even though there are offices in the Church there is no division between clergy and laity and consequently the whole church is involved in pastoring the entire city.

Reflections

Because most of these paradigm shifts are in place, reaching cities through prayer evangelism is unavoidable. It is going to happen with or without our participation. The church has been changed forever through these paradigm shifts and there is no going back to the old days. Not everybody is aware of this and not everybody who is aware is fully aware. It is very much like the beginning of puberty. We know that something has changed but we still do not fully understand it. But one thing is certain: there is no going back.

This is why now is the moment for those who have a passion for the lost and a love for their cities and who believe in and practice prayer evangelism to come together. It is time to discern God's strategy in order to develop, at the basic level, prototypes where the first level of a city reached for Christ is in evidence and at the optimum level to see that city, as well as others, totally transformed because the Kingdom of God has come to them.

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Harvest Evangelism

