

TIMOTHY KELLER



Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered
Ministry in Your City

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To Terry Gyger,
founder of the Redeemer Church Planting Center,
missions pioneer, colleague and friend.

And to the staff,
church planters,
and network leaders
of Redeemer City to City,
for living out this vision
in the global cities of the world.



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Introduction

The first time I read an article written by Tim Keller (b. 1950), I was at a height of 30,000 feet. It was almost exactly one year before 9/11, and I was flying to New York for a pastor's weekend in Redeemer Presbyterian Church, planted and led by Keller. In those days Keller's fame had been growing for some time already in my own country, the Netherlands. A Christian journalist had been featuring a series of jubilant articles about his visits to Redeemer, and especially about Keller's fresh, contemporary communication of the Christian faith. A friend of mine, a theological student, had written a Master's thesis on Redeemer that drew so much attention from Dutch Christians he practically had to live behind his computer in order to answer the stream of requests for copies. His research told the fascinating story of an ordinary Reformed church in a large world class city, a church with a broad theology, simple yet sophisticated worship meetings, and a leading pastor of a type we had not seen before in America: carelessly dressed, somewhat near-sighted, no blinding toothpaste smile, in the possession of a nasal ironic voice, with a professorial demeanour, and casually quoting from Kafka, Madonna, Luther, or *The Sixth Sense*.

In short, it was about time for the denominational board for evangelism in the Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, my employer back then, to visit this unknown preacher from America in his own environment. And since we were crossing the Atlantic anyway, we could also go to Chicago and attend Willow Creek, that other large American church with a worldwide fame. Immediately, the difference between the two churches became clear to us. From Willow Creek we received a colourful brochure full of pictures of happy people and little text in between. But Redeemer sent us a pile of gray paper, thick as a brick, covered with small print, and without any

pictures. These documents already contained the main outlines of this book. It was all about the gospel, the city, church planting and renewal, revival, and culture. All this was written in clear prose, well structured, and in Keller's typical style: avoiding all extremes on the left and the right, going right through the centre.

The title of this book, *Center Church*, expresses this fundamental characteristic of Keller's theology very well. Keller seeks balance in everything; he is always looking for a route in between extremes. He is no friend of theological liberalism, but he is averse to fundamentalism. Hyperactive meetings loaded with mass-psychological manipulation are not his cup of tea, yet formal, rigid worship gatherings where the life of the Spirit is sacrificed to the idol of structure, are a horror to him. Keller does not want a church that is completely 'seeker-centred', as if the church were nothing but a recruitment agency, but he considers churches that are not continually sensitive to the needs and questions of inquirers as defunct. Whoever looks for spiritual security in strict Sabbath discipline and suppression of carnal desires, will encounter Keller as a messenger of grace and freedom. However, according to Keller, whoever thinks that God will like us anyway regardless of what we do, has not understood what God's love is all about.

This same balanced tone characterized the article that captured my attention in the airplane. It was about the gospel: what is it? Keller's explanation of the two 'thieves' of the gospel – relativism and moralism, touched me profoundly. All this was so lucid: intellectually it made a lot of sense, and at the same time the article invited me to search my soul. This combination of intellectual clarity and piety – echoing his beloved Puritans – is in my opinion a distinctive and fundamental characteristic of Keller's theology and preaching. Apparently

it also touches something within many European Christians – at least those with an orthodox Protestant (evangelical) background. For more liberal Christians, Keller may come across as someone a bit too convinced of the truth. A Dutch theologian, reviewing Keller’s apologetic book *Reason for God*, stated that Keller rightly challenges everybody to doubt his or her own views, but that he seems far less prepared to do so with his own views. There may be some truth in that. On the surface, Keller does not show much doubt, or criticism of his own opinions. Yet, it remains to be seen to what extent such comments are really helpful. Obviously, Keller is rooted in orthodox Protestantism, and he does not intend to remove himself from this position. His prose is clear and radiates strong convictions. Sometimes he makes firm statements about issues that may allow more nuanced views. Not everyone likes this, but it cannot be denied that Keller is a man with a deep and honest conviction. He left a nice academic position in order to embark on an uncertain adventure as a church planter in New York – then a graveyard for White middle class missionaries. Even when he became successful, he never sought publicity. He did not establish an organization for self-promotion, and he did not write books. Until recently, his only book was a work about mercy ministries, based on Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan. Moreover, few people in Europe know that Keller is pastor in a denomination in which he and his congregation are often viewed with some suspicion as much too progressive, and far too prepared to cooperate with other churches. Working in this splits position between a very conservative denomination and a very secular missionary context, Keller remains standing by continually seeking a Biblical route, by explaining things over and over again, by not diving into polemics, and above everything by not letting himself be distracted from his calling.

I also find it interesting that Keller, in distinction from many other successful American pastors, has not begun a personal firm. He does not travel around the world, apart from several contributions to the EMA-conference in London – organized by a pastor who has meant much for Keller in

his early years. The first time for Keller to appear on the European continent was a conference for church planters in Berlin (2011). Keller shares little information from his private life, but as far as we know he spends his days in an extraordinary disciplined way: praying, studying, writing, and talking as much as possible with people who look for meaning in their lives. It is not without reason that *New York Magazine* called him the city’s “most successful evangelist”. Keller believes the message of Jesus and he lives this message, for many years, and consistently. He may not be the most creative theologian on the planet, but he is a faithful pastor, an extremely gifted evangelist, he draws on a wide breadth of Protestant theology, and countless people have received forgiveness, meaning, and a new purpose in life through his ministry. Moreover, his strong professional discipline is an example for many pastors.

In short, I believe that more liberal Christians also have much to learn from Keller. Often they will clash with his robust convictions, but they will also discover that Keller has thought through them, and that he knows how to defend them. And to be honest: to what extent is liberalism just as dogmatic as any other type of religion, even if its doctrines are wrapped in a rhetoric of doubt and insecurity? For some Christians, it seems, anything is better than being outdated or evangelical, but this means that they merely adopt another more or less superior position that isolates them from others. In the end everybody chooses a perspective from which he or she views the world, and in general no one is prepared to continually reconstruct this perspective. I would like to see that Christians outside traditional evangelical congregations take more notice of Keller and his work. Whatever we may think of him, here we meet somebody who for the last twenty-five years has succeeded in reconnecting large groups of young secularized people in a major city with the Christian tradition. It will never be difficult to criticize his position, especially because Europeans are so good at being critical, but there is no doubt that Keller is highly relevant. He has much to tell us, and his track record is impressive.

Now that Keller is in his sixties, he begins to

work on his spiritual legacy. In Redeemer possible successors are being trained. Structures have been established in order to share Redeemer's fundamental drive with other churches: the large cities as places where vital churches must be planted. And Keller has set himself to processing the gigantic amount of gray piles of paper, covered with print, that he has produced during the last three decades. A long series of books that have recently been published is the result of this, books on preaching, apologetics, mercy ministry, spirituality, Bible study, church renewal, leadership, and the city. On the one hand they provide insight in the range of subjects that encounter a city pastor in the course of his ministry, and on the other hand they show the impressive creativity and depth with which Keller approaches these subjects. Everybody who reads these books can see that Keller has never had the ambition to do innovative academic theology. He remains in the middle of the road; he connects with 'mere' traditional theology, working eclectically with a large number of writers that have inspired him – writers such as Martin Luther, Jonathan Edwards, C.S. Lewis, and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. If you want to find the newest fads in the doctrine of the Trinity or in soteriology, do not consult Keller. Although one, while reading Keller, cannot be but impressed by his capability to absorb such new insights and to build them into his own thinking. But the most important contribution of his books is that they are true congregational theology of the best kind: orientated towards 'ordinary' Christians who want to think through their faith, and who want to draw on the best that Christianity has to offer. Keller does not position himself before the Christian tradition, obscuring the sources and drawing attention to himself; he is rather an excellent *chef de cuisine* who prepares delicious food with traditional ingredients, and presents them in surprising and tasteful ways. Keller's books are vintage theology: Jesus Christ in the centre, rooted in tradition, sensitive to pastoral and intellectual problems, with an open eye for our late modern culture – and that's it. It is fair to say that I know little theological or pastoral literature that can compare to Keller's books in these respects. In this he

is a nice combination of American pragmatism and European desire for reflection.

This book may be considered as a kind of capstone to Keller's work. It contains his vision, developed in decades of ministry, of being church in an urban society. This vision took shape already in an early stage of his career. I have already written that I have found much in this book that reminds me of the papers that were sent to us in the Fall of 2000. Fourteen years later, Keller has worked out this vision consistently, and he has enriched it with many theological insights that have recently become available, especially in the areas of ecclesiology and missiology. Regardless of whether it invites affirmation or objection, the book is a beautiful survey of everything that has been thought out in the field of missionary ecclesiology during the last decades. Moreover, everything that is in it has been tested in a long ministry, in a demanding context. The power of this book is that it provides a unique formula: it does not contain a purely theoretical theology that shines but leaves the heart cold, but neither does it offer a collection of action designs that may set us initially in motion but lead to exhaustion pretty soon. Keller's book is an example of what he himself calls 'middleware'. It is a form of congregational theology in which reflection and practical experience encounter and reinforce each other. Therefore this book is extremely suitable for preachers, missional leaders, church policy boards, and for students who look for a survey of high-quality practical theological reflection of being church in a secular context. There are far too few of such books in Europe, and just for this reason this book is more than welcome.

For this European version of *Center Church*, the original work has been reduced and slightly adapted, with permission from Tim Keller and the publisher. Tim Keller has always emphasized that his ideas and Redeemer's practice aren't blueprints, but are at best an inspiring example showing how certain principles and convictions can be worked out in the context of a major city. To revise his book is therefore entirely faithful to Keller's own ministry vision. Of course, Keller frequently refers to American history, and those parts we have left out. Also Keller

has a desire for completeness that sometimes slows down reading. Therefore we have removed as many excurses and sidebars as possible. The space that was gained has been used well. Eight European theologians and church leaders from seven different nations (Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, and Spain) have been asked to read a section of the book, and to write a critical, constructive response. Their leading question was: what can we learn from Tim Keller, and where do we need to adapt, correct, or complement his writing with a view to our own context? All contributors have been selected on the basis of their evangelical convictions, theological expertise, and missional involvement. Some of them have interacted with Keller's writing reflectively and critically, while others have more or less used Keller's text as a point of departure for their own analysis of their contexts. In this way, *Center Church* has become a new book: Keller speaks on almost every page, but at the same time his thinking has been processed into a new frame that is applied to the many European contexts that are present in this book.

The original book is constructed almost mathematically, in thirty chapters distributed among eight themes. We have respected this framework as much as possible. Together the themes of the book can be read as a complete missiological circle that begins with the question 'What is the Christian message?', and concludes with the question how this border-crossing movement of mission can continue until the ends of the earth and the end of time. In between we find thorough studies of contextualization, models of culture, church organization, missionary theology, and so on. Everything is linked together very carefully, but at the same time every separate section makes a good read. All this means that this is a genuine study book, extremely suited to read and discuss with a group.

As for the European writers in this book, it may be expedient to give some background information. After all, as most contributors point out, the European context is quite different from the original American context in which Keller lives and works.

My first remark concerns the position and status

of evangelicalism in Europe. As an Anglo-Saxon evangelical, Keller represents one of the most influential departments of American Christianity. This breathes into his writings a self-confidence that is rarely found in European Christian literature. With a few exceptions, evangelicalism has never become very influential on the European continent. Self-confessed evangelicals in Europe usually belong to the so-called 'free churches' (Baptists, Methodists, Brethren, etc.) or to minority groups within the mainline churches. However, nowhere outside Britain do the free churches comprise more than 5% of the population, and more often it is less than 1%. Of course, there are evangelical Christians in other churches as well, such as the German Protestant Church, the various Dutch Reformed denominations, or the Hungarian Reformed Church, but to the extent that these Christians embrace the typical evangelical characteristics of revivalism, evangelism, church planting, and the like, they have to defend them against majorities who – even if they would consider themselves orthodox Protestants – are not especially eager to embrace such features. Moreover, this book also contains contributions from evangelicals writing from predominantly Roman Catholic nations, where evangelicals are an almost invisible minority – even though they are usually the most vital Protestant presence there. This minority position of evangelicalism typically translates itself in the contributions of this book by either an emphasis on modesty and careful listening to Christians from other traditions, or, in contrast, by an almost complete neglect of other Christian traditions. If I am correct, the first attitude is more often found in Protestant nations, while the second is found especially in Catholic majority areas. Both attitudes make sense in their own contexts, but it is important to underline this very different status of evangelical Protestantism on the European continent.

Second, for a good understanding of the European contributions it is important to appreciate the legacy of church-state relationships in Europe. Here, the word 'Christendom' presents itself as an explanatory term. 'Christendom' may be defined as a period and an area in which church and state

worked closely together to the extent of using political force to Christianize populations. Typical elements of Christendom are state appointments of bishops and priests, church tax, laws on church membership and church-going, so-called 'package deals' in which support for the poor or education goes through the channels of the church, and so on. On an individual level, 'Christendom', means every measure or structure that makes it easier or more expedient for citizens to be connected with the church than to disconnect themselves. As appears from the contributions in this book, all over Europe there are different stages of 'post-Christendom'. In this respect, Hungary and Denmark are interesting case studies, as any reader can conclude from the chapters by Andras Lovas and Jens Bruun Kofoed. Of course, it also makes a huge difference if a contributor writes from the perspective of an 'outsider' or an 'insider' to the Christendom arrangement in his particular country. In this sense, it is interesting to compare the chapters written by 'outsiders' Daniel Liechti (France), Jose de Segovia (Spain), and Leonardo De Chirico (Italy) with those of the 'insiders' Andras Lovas (Hungary), Martin Reppenhagen, and Michael Herbst (both Germany). Finally, an important element of Christendom is its dream of creating a Christian culture, with Christian laws, and the like. According to some mission historians, the origin of Anglo-Saxon evangelicalism was rooted in a connection of individual conversion and nostalgia for a Christian culture that was under siege at the end of the 18th century. Keller's dream of impacting the cities, and national cultures through them, seems to fit into this evangelical tradition. However, on European soil dreams of a totalized Christian culture are not looked at with great sympathy, especially by those who have been marginalized in the past as a consequence of 'Christian' laws, and church-state cooperation. Jose de Segovia from Spain points to this uncomfortable fact. In short, this typical European relationship with historical Christendom and contemporary post-Christendom (in several stages of its development) must be understood in order to appreciate the European reception of Keller's emphasis on cultural transformation.

Finally, Europe is far more secularized than the United States. While, America may be more 'post-Christendom' – at least, in some ways – than Europe, many European nations are certainly far more 'post-Christian'. Even though formal church membership is still quite high all over Europe (with some notable exceptions, though), regular church attendance is as low as 2-3% in some areas, and, outside Italy and Poland, it is nowhere more than 15%. Belief in a personal God, in the Bible as God's Word, in Jesus as God's Son, and in the authority of Christian ethical teaching, is low and decreasing. Of course, this affects the European reception of a book written by an American evangelical, even an evangelical as perceptive and conversant with culture as Tim Keller. David Novák, writing from the extremely secularized environment of the Czech Republic, emphasizes that American-style apologetic does not land well in his country. Within the sceptical milieu of many European countries evangelical appeals to 'absolute gospel truth', 'a whole new way of life', and 'either-or' terminology smell like naïve, black-and-white perceptions of reality, or – worse – as a return to a new totalitarian ideology. Other contributors to this volume who write from a post-Communist context (Hungary, East-Germany), also mention this deep suspicion against 'ideology' and 'authority'. As for secularization, Martin Reppenhagen writes that Keller's dichotomy between 'gospel' and 'religion', although helpful from a theological perspective, may play into the deep alienation with all kinds of religion and religious language in Eastern Germany. Michael Herbst, writing from the same context, introduces the 'post-atheist': someone for whom religious faith is not even relevant enough to reject it. Nevertheless, all these writers make clear that they have benefited in many ways from reading Keller's multidimensional and profound perspective on the renewal of the church and the communication of the gospel.

Although these points are important to keep in mind as background information, all respondents in this book agree that Europeans have much to learn from Keller. They are inspired by his pragmatic approach, his creative communication of

the gospel, and his fresh combination of intellectuality and faith. Keller is an unembarrassed and confident messenger of the gospel of Jesus Christ in what is sometimes called the world's capital city. His integration of spirituality, tradition, Bible study, pragmatism, and culture vision is unique and inspiring. *Center Church* is an incredibly rich book. Nobody with a heart for the mis-

sionary calling of Christians in the Western world can ignore it.

Stefan Paas

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CENTER CHURCH THEOLOGICAL VISION

SUCCESSFUL, FAITHFUL, OR FRUITFUL?

Once we embark on a life of ministry, it is only natural to ask, “How am I doing? And how will I know?” One answer for ministers today is *success*. Many say that if your church is growing in conversions, members, and giving, your ministry is effective. This view of the ministry is on the rise because the expressive individualism of modern culture has deeply eroded loyalty to institutions and communities. Individuals are now “spiritual consumers” who will go to a church only if (and as long as) its worship and public speaking are immediately riveting and attractive. Therefore, ministers who can create powerful religious experiences and draw large numbers of people on the power of their personal appeal are rewarded with large, growing churches. That is one way to evaluate a ministry.

In reaction to this emphasis on quantifiable success, many have countered that the only true criterion for ministers is *faithfulness*. All that matters in this view is that a minister be sound in doctrine, godly in character, and faithful in preaching and in pastoring people. But the “faithful — not successful” backlash is an oversimplification that has dangers as well. The demand that ministers be not just sincere and faithful but also *competent* is not a modern innovation. The famous nineteenth-century English Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon pointed out that it takes more than faithfulness to make a minister:

Certain good men appeal to me who are distinguished by enormous [passion] and zeal, and a conspicuous absence of brains; brethren who would talk forever and ever upon nothing — who would stamp and thump the Bible, and get nothing out of it at all; earnest, awfully earnest, mountains in labor of the most painful kind; but nothing comes of it all . . . therefore I have usually declined their applications.¹

Notice that Spurgeon has obvious affection for these men. He is not ridiculing them. He says they are faithful and deeply committed to the work of the ministry, but “nothing comes of it all.” When they teach, there is little or no learning; when they evangelize, there is little or no converting. And so he declines their application to his college for ministers. In short, it is an oversimplification to say that faithfulness is all that matters. No — something more than faithfulness is needed to assess whether we are being the ministers we should be.

As I read, reflected, and taught, I came to the conclusion that a more biblical theme for ministerial evaluation than either success or faithfulness is *fruitfulness*. Jesus, of course, told his disciples that they were to “bear much fruit” (John 15:8). Paul spoke even more specifically. He spoke of conversions as “fruit” when he desired to preach in Rome: “that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles” (Rom 1:13 KJV). Paul also spoke of the “fruit” of godly character that a minister can see growing in Christians under his care. This included the “fruit of the Spirit” (Gal 5:22). Good deeds, such as mercy to the poor, are called “fruit” as well (Rom 15:28).

Paul spoke of the pastoral nurture of congregations as a form of gardening. He told the Corinthian Christians they were “God’s field” in which some ministers planted, some watered, and some reaped (1 Cor 3:9). The gardening metaphor shows that both success and faithfulness by themselves are insufficient criteria for evaluating ministry. Gardeners must be faithful in their work, but they must also be skillful, or the garden will fail. Yet in the end, the *degree* of the success of the garden (or the ministry) is determined by factors beyond the control of the gardener. The level of fruitfulness varies due to “soil conditions” (that is, some groups of people have a greater hardness of heart than others) and “weather conditions” (that is, the

work of God's sovereign Spirit) as well.

The church growth movement has made many lasting contributions to our practice of ministry. But its overemphasis on technique and results can put too much pressure on ministers because it underemphasizes the importance of godly character and the sovereignty of God. Those who claim that "what is required is faithfulness" are largely right, but this mind-set can take too much pressure off church leaders. It does not lead them to ask hard questions when faithful ministries bear little fruit. When fruitfulness is our criterion for evaluation, we are held accountable but not crushed by the expectation that a certain number of lives will be changed dramatically under our ministry.

The "secret" of Redeemer's fruitfulness

After nearly a decade of pastoral ministry in a small town in Virginia, I moved to Philadelphia, where I served on the faculty of Westminster Seminary in the mid-1980s. There I was called to teach preaching, pastoral leadership, evangelism, and the doctrine of the church. The academic position afforded me my first chance to reflect on what I had learned in my first busy years of church leadership. It also gave me the opportunity to study about ministry at a depth that had been impossible previously. In 1989, our family moved to New York City to begin Redeemer Presbyterian Church. A few years later, we began getting inquiries from pastors around the country (and eventually overseas) who asked if they could visit us because "we want to see what you are doing that is working so well in Manhattan." After a while, it became impossible to see everyone individually, and so we began to host regular weekends for visitors to observe the church.

Those conferences called for me to summarize what we were doing that was bearing fruit in the city. The talks I gave were based on the syllabi I had developed at Westminster to answer the question,

"What makes gospel ministry faithful and fruitful?" But those lectures had been more theoretical. Now I was being asked for principles of ministry grounded in our everyday experience of gospel work in Manhattan.

But the process of identifying "principles of

ministry" was not easy for me because what I wanted to say to observers didn't fit very well into existing categories.

You see, two kinds of books are ordinarily written for pastors and church leaders. One kind lays out general biblical principles for all churches. These books start with scriptural exegesis and biblical theology and list the characteristics and functions of a true biblical church. The most important characteristic is that a ministry be faithful to the Word and sound in doctrine, but these books also rightly call for biblical standards of evangelism, church leadership, community and membership, worship, and service. All of this is critical, but I knew many ministers who conducted their ministry on these sound principles and who had seen a great deal of fruit elsewhere, but when they moved to New York City — still working on the same sound foundation — they had far less impact than they had elsewhere. I concluded that an understanding of the biblical marks of a healthy church was absolutely foundational and necessary, but that something more should be said if gospel ministry was going to be productive.

Another category of book operates at the opposite end of the spectrum. These books do not spend much time laying biblical theological foundations, though virtually all of them cite biblical passages. Instead, they are practical "how-to" books that describe specific mind-sets, programs, and ways to do church. This genre of book exploded onto the scene during the church growth movement of the 1970s and 1980s through the writing of authors such as C. Peter Wagner and Robert Schuller. A second generation of books in a similar vein appeared with personal accounts of successful churches, authored by senior pastors, distilling practical principles for others to use. A third generation of practical church books began more than ten years ago. These are volumes that directly criticize the church growth "how-to" books. Nevertheless, they also consist largely of case studies and pictures of what a good church looks like on the ground, with practical advice on how to organize and conduct ministry. Again, from these volumes I almost always profited, coming away from each book

with at least one good idea I could use. But by and large, I found the books less helpful than I hoped they would be. Implicitly or explicitly, they made near-absolutes out of techniques and models that had worked in a certain place at a certain time. I was fairly certain that many of these methods would not work in New York and were not as universally applicable as the authors implied. In particular, church leaders outside of the United States found these books irritating because the authors assumed that what worked in a suburb of a U.S. city would work almost anywhere.

As people pressed me to speak and write about our experience at Redeemer, I realized that most were urging me to write my own version of the second type of book. Pastors did not want me to recapitulate biblical doctrine and principles of church life they had gotten in seminary. Instead, they were looking for a “secrets of success” book. They wanted instructions for specific programs and techniques that appealed to urban people. One pastor said, “I’ve tried the Willow Creek model. Now I’m ready to try the Redeemer model.” People came to us because they knew we were thriving in one of the least church-ed, most secular cities in the U.S. But when visitors first started coming to Redeemer in the early and mid-1990s, they were disappointed because they did not discern a new “model” — at least not in the form of unique, new programs. At first glance, Redeemer seems so traditional. To reach unchurched, postmodern young adults, many ministers preach in warehouses, dress informally, sit on stools, show video clips, and use indie-rock music. At Redeemer we did none of these things, yet we had thousands of the very kind of secular, sophisticated young adults the church was not reaching.

So, for example, Redeemer has had classical music in its morning services and jazz music in its evening services. This is unusual, so some have asked, “Is this how you reach urban people? Is this a key?” My immediate response is, “No, it isn’t. Not only is it likely you will come to different conclusions about music in different world cities, but there have been and are other effective ways to use music in worship that are effective in New

York City.” Others have concluded that the type of preaching at Redeemer has been the key. They noticed my style of quoting liberally from literary and secular media sources and conclude that this is the way to reach large numbers of urban people. But it is possible to adopt this style to little effect. Preaching is compelling to young secular adults not if preachers use video clips from their favourite movies and dress informally and sound sophisticated, but if the preachers understand their hearts and culture so well that listeners feel the force of the sermon’s reasoning, even if in the end they don’t agree with it. This is not a matter of style or program.

During these years of conferences, it became clear that the real “secret” of Redeemer’s fruitfulness did not lie in its ministry programs but in something that functioned at a deeper level. What was important for observers to grasp was not so much the particular ministry expression but the way in which we arrived at the expressions we used at Redeemer. We had thought long and hard about the character and implications of the gospel and then long and hard about the culture of New York City, about the sensibilities of both Christians and non-Christians in our midst, and about the emotional and intellectual landscape of the center city. It was the character of that analysis and decision-making process rather than its specific products that was critical to the fruitfulness of our ministry in a global city center. We wanted to be shaped by what Jonathan Edwards called “the rules of the gospel.”² We did not simply choose music or sermon illustrations to please our own tastes and make us happy, any more than Christ lived to please himself.

Hardware, middleware, software

What was this deeper level, exactly? As time went on, I began to realize it was a middle space between two more obvious dimensions of ministry. All of us have a *doctrinal foundation* — a set of theological beliefs — and all of us conduct particular *forms of ministry*. But many ministers take up programs and practices of ministry that fit well with neither their doctrinal beliefs nor their cultural context.

They adopt popular methods that are essen-

tially “glued on” from the outside — alien to the church’s theology or setting (sometimes both!). And when this happens, we find a lack of fruitfulness. These ministers don’t change people’s lives within the church and don’t reach people in their city. Why not? Because the programs do not grow naturally out of reflection on both the gospel and the distinctness of their surrounding culture.

For example, imagine that a minister who had a flourishing ministry in an exurban area moves to an urban setting. He continues to preach and pastor in exactly the same way he did before, and soon he sees an alarming drop in attendance and in lives being changed. He may go in one of three directions. First, he may simply keep doing the same thing, attributing lack of fruit to the hard-heartedness of urban dwellers. Second, he may read books, looking for new programs that worked elsewhere — usually in suburban U.S. contexts — and finding that when he adopts them, they are also ineffective in his new setting. Third, he may actually come to believe he needs to reengineer and change his doctrinal foundation, reasoning that contemporary people can’t accept traditional teachings on judgment and atonement. In each case, however, he is failing to notice the middle space between doctrine and practice — the space where we reflect deeply on our theology and our culture to understand how both of them can shape our ministry. This leads to better choices of existing ministry forms, or to the development of promising new ones.

Therefore, if you think of your doctrinal foundation as “hardware” and of ministry programs as “software,” it is important to understand the existence of something called “middleware.” I am no computer expert (to say the least), but my computer-savvy friends tell me that middleware is a software layer that lies between the hardware and operating system itself and the various software applications being deployed by the computer’s user. In the same way, between one’s doctrinal beliefs and ministry practices should be a well-conceived vision for how to bring the gospel to bear on the particular cultural setting and historical moment. This is something more practical than just

doctrinal beliefs but much more theological than “how-to steps” for carrying out a particular ministry. Once this vision is in place, with its emphases and values, it leads church leaders to make good decisions on how to worship, disciple, evangelize, serve, and engage culture in their field of ministry — whether in a city, suburb, or small town.

THEOLOGICAL VISION

This “middleware” is similar to what Richard Lints, professor of theology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, calls a “theological vision.”³ According to Lints, our doctrinal foundation, drawn from Scripture, is the starting point for everything:

Theology must first be about a conversation with God . . . God speaks and we listen . . . The Christian theological framework is primarily about listening — listening to God. One of the great dangers we face in doing theology is our desire to do all the talking . . . We most often capitulate to this temptation by placing alien conceptual boundaries on what God can and has said in the Word . . . We force the message of redemption into a cultural package that distorts its actual intentions. Or we attempt to view the gospel solely from the perspective of a tradition that has little living connection to the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. Or we place rational restrictions on the very notion of God instead of allowing God to define the notions of rationality.⁴

However, the doctrinal foundation is not enough. Before you choose specific ministry methods, you must first ask how your doctrinal beliefs “might relate to the modern world.” The result of that question “thereby form[s] a theological vision.”⁵ In other words, a theological vision is a vision for what you are going to *do* with your doctrine in a particular time and place. And what does a theological vision develop from? Lints shows that it comes, of course, from deep reflection on the Bible itself, but it also depends a great deal on what you think of the culture around you.

Lints explains why we cannot stop with our doctrinal foundation but must also look at our

setting — our historical moment and our cultural location:

Having recognized the source of the conversation [God], we must then take into account those with whom he speaks. God does not speak in a vacuum but to and through people and in and through history. The speech of God . . . is addressed to people across different cultural histories, and for this reason (among others), it is often misunderstood and misinterpreted . . .

Nicodemus and the Pharisees stood in a tradition, were conditioned by a culture, and applied certain principles of rationality to their own conversations with Jesus. We do the same today. It is . . . [critical that] the people of God [come] to an awareness of their historical, cultural, and rational filters so that they will not be ruled by them.⁶

This reveals, I believe, one (among others) of the key reasons for failures in fruitfulness. We must discern where and how the culture can be challenged and affirmed. The answers to these questions have enormous impact on how we preach, evangelize, organize, lead, disciple, and shepherd people. Lints offers this important observation:

A theological vision allows [people] to see their culture in a way different than they had ever been able to see it before . . . Those who are empowered by the theological vision do not simply stand against the mainstream impulses of the culture but take the initiative both to understand and speak to that culture from the framework of the Scriptures . . . The modern theological vision must seek to bring the entire counsel of God into the world of its time in order that its time might be transformed.⁷

I propose a similar but slightly more specific set of questions for the development of a theological vision. As we answer these questions, a theological vision will emerge:

- What is the gospel, and how do we bring it to bear on the hearts of people today?
- What is this culture like, and how can we both connect to it and challenge it in our communication?

- Where are we located — city, suburb, town, rural area — and how does this affect our ministry?
- To what degree and how should Christians be involved in civic life and cultural production?
- How do the various ministries in a church — word and deed, community and instruction — relate to one another?
- How innovative will our church be and how traditional?
- How will our church relate to other churches in our city and region?
- How will we make our case to the culture about the truth of Christianity?

This concept of a theological vision explains how, for example, our conservative Presbyterian denomination, in which all churches share the same detailed doctrinal foundation (Westminster Confession of Faith) can be deeply divided over ministry expressions and methods, such as music, preaching style, approach to organization and leadership, forms of outreach, and so on. The reason is that churches with the same basic doctrine are shaped by different theological visions because they are answering these questions about culture, tradition, and rationality differently.

For example, some churches believe nearly all popular culture is corrupt, and therefore they will not use popular music in worship. Others have no problem doing so. Why? It is not merely a matter of personal preference. Implicit questions of theological vision are being posed and answered when we make such decisions. The fundamental differences are often between competing theological visions, yet because theological vision is largely invisible, people inevitably (and unfortunately) conclude that the differences are doctrinal.

It could be argued that an acquaintance with the category of theological vision will help us understand many of the conflicts in local churches and denominations. Our doctrinal statements of faith and confessions do not tell us what in our culture can be affirmed and what can be challenged, nor do they speak directly to our relationship to tradition and the Christian past or reflect much on how human reason operates. Yet our ministries

are shaped profoundly by our assumptions about these issues.

When we see other people who say they believe our doctrine but are doing ministry in a way we greatly dislike, we tend to suspect they have fallen away from their doctrinal commitments. They may have, of course; yet it's equally likely that they haven't strayed but are working from a different theological vision. Unless we can make these assumptions more visible and conscious, we will misunderstand one another and find it difficult to respect one another.

Our theological vision, growing out of our doctrinal foundation but including implicit or explicit readings of culture, is the most immediate cause of our decisions and choices regarding ministry expression.

So what is a theological vision? It is a faithful restatement of the gospel with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in a type of culture at a moment in history.

Why a whole book on theological vision?

The need to explain and chart these insights became more acute as we began to plant churches — first in New York City and then in many other global cities. We wanted to help church planters learn as much as they could from our reflection and experience, but we had no interest in starting little copies of Redeemer because we knew that every city — indeed, every neighborhood — was different. We believed a city needed all kinds of churches to reach all kinds of people. And we knew that church planters need to *create* ministry, not replicate it. We wanted to help plant churches that would be unlike Redeemer in many particulars but still be like Redeemer in certain ineffable ways. For that to happen, we had to begin articulating a theological vision that lay somewhere between doctrinal beliefs on the one hand and specific ministry programs on the other.

Redeemer City to City is a nonprofit organization involved in global city church planting on every continent, across a wide array of theological traditions. It should not be surprising that nearly all of our training and coaching centers on the

THE FORMATION OF THEOLOGICAL VISION

According to Richard Lints in *The Fabric of Theology*, four factors influence the formation of a theological vision. The foundation is, of course, *listening to the Bible to arrive at our doctrinal beliefs*. The second is *reflection on culture*, as we ask what modern culture is and which of its impulses are to be criticized and which are to be affirmed. A third is our particular *understanding of reason*. Some see human reason as being able to lead a nonbeliever a long way toward the truth, while others deny this. Our view of the nature of human rationality will shape how we preach to, evangelize, argue with, and engage with non-Christians. The fourth factor is the role of *theological tradition*. Some believers are antitraditionalists who feel free to virtually reinvent Christianity each generation without giving any weight to the interpreters of the Christian community in the past. Others give great weight to tradition and are opposed to innovation with regard to communicating the gospel and practicing ministry.

Lints argues that what we believe about culture, reason, and tradition will influence how we understand what Scripture says. And even if three ministers arrive at the same set of doctrinal beliefs, if they hold different views of culture, reason, and tradition, then their theological visions and the shapes of their ministries will be very different.

A theological vision is a faithful restatement of the gospel with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in a type of culture at a moment in history.

theological vision outlined in this book. Once we assess prospective church planters for their gifts and theological soundness, we spend relatively little time on doctrinal foundations (though our training is highly theological) or ministry expression (though church planters are wrestling with concrete issues of expression and form in their

respective churches). Here is what we have found in two decades of experience.

1. Theological vision is hard, but it is what pastors need. Urban pastors struggle to connect doctrinal foundations to ministry expression in a meaningful way. There is a tendency either to over-contextualize to the city (which usually leads to weakening or relativizing a church's commitment to orthodoxy) or to undercontextualize (which leads to inward-facing churches that reach only certain kinds of people and fail to advance a movement of the gospel in the community). But we find that the quality of the theological vision often determines the vitality of the ministry, particularly in urban settings.

2. It is transferable and adaptable. We find that this theological vision is highly transferable to orthodox, confessing churches in many cultural contexts and styles. Focusing on the theological vision allows us truly to serve a movement rather than to just create or inspire churches in our own image. It also suits those entrepreneurial leaders who neither want to reengineer doctrine nor be given a template to implement but who want to create new and beautiful ministry expressions.

3. It goes beyond churches. We have found that this theological vision not only fuels the planting and leading of churches but also relates to all kinds of ministry and even to the mission and vocation of people who are not professional ministers.

CENTER CHURCH

In this book, we will call our theological vision – this particular set of emphases and stances for ministry – “Center Church.” I know there has been a trend over the last few years to publish books with the title _____ *Church*, and I join this trend with two particular perils in mind. My first concern is that the term will be used as a label or a diagnostic tool, as in “*This is a Center Church, but that one isn't.*” I will certainly try to avoid this kind of unhelpful shorthand, and I ask you to do the same. My second concern is that people will read political or doctrinal overtones into the term, as if Redeemer is advocating that to be a faithful Christian you must occupy some neutral center between liberal and conservative political views. This has nothing

to do with what we mean by the term.

Those issues notwithstanding, we chose this term for several reasons.

1. The gospel is at its center. In the first section, I will seek to make the case that it is one thing to have a ministry that is gospel believing and even gospel proclaiming but quite another to have one that is gospel centered.

2. The center is the place of balance. In this book, you will hear a great deal about the need to strike balances as Scripture does: of word *and* deed ministries; of challenging *and* affirming human culture; of cultural engagement *and* countercultural distinctiveness; of commitment to truth *and* generosity to others who don't share the same beliefs; of tradition *and* innovation in practice.

3. This theological vision is shaped by and for urban and cultural centers. Redeemer and the other churches we have helped to start minister in the center city. We believe ministry in the center of global cities is the highest priority for the church in the twenty-first century. While this theological vision is widely applicable, it is distinctly flavored by the urban experience.

MIDDLEWARE, THEOLOGICAL VISION, AND DNA

As we found ourselves driven away from both the general (foundational discussions of what the church should be) and the particular (detailed programs and styles), we had to find a way to talk about what we meant. We have not typically employed the term “theological vision” or the “middleware” metaphor. More often at Redeemer, we use the language of city-gospel “DNA.”

Why use this particular image? DNA is a set of instructions deep within the cells of an organism that directs how it develops, grows, and self-replicates. At the core of Redeemer's ministry is orthodox evangelical theology — the classic doctrines of the biblical gospel. We want our doctrine to act as a control and driver of our ministry, and this will only happen if we use doctrine to generate a theological vision. We do so by asking, “How should this unchanging gospel doctrine be communicated and embodied in a great, global city like New York in this day and age?” Our answers to this question — our theological

vision — are the DNA that enables us to choose or develop ministry expressions that are not only consistent with our doctrinal commitments but that fit our time, place, and culture. As a result, our ministry can develop, grow, and self-replicate fruitfully.

4. The theological vision is at the center of ministry. As described above, a theological vision creates a bridge between doctrine and expression. It is central to how all ministry happens. Two churches can have different doctrinal frameworks and ministry expressions but the same theological vision — and they will feel like sister ministries. On the other hand, two churches can have similar doctrinal frameworks and ministry expressions but different theological visions — and they will feel distinct.

Center Church commitments

The Center Church theological vision can be expressed most simply in three basic commitments: Gospel, City, and Movement.⁸

Gospel. Both the Bible and church history show us that it is possible to hold all the correct individual biblical doctrines and yet functionally lose our grasp on the gospel. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones argues that while we obviously lose the gospel if we fall into heterodoxy, we can also operationally stop preaching and using the gospel on ourselves through dead orthodoxy or through doctrinal imbalances of emphasis. Sinclair Ferguson argues that there are many forms of both legalism and antinomianism, some of which are based on overt heresy but more often on matters of emphasis and spirit.⁹ It is critical, therefore, in every new generation and setting to find ways to *communicate the gospel clearly and strikingly*, distinguishing it from its opposites and counterfeits. This particular subject is not just hardware but also middleware. Parties who agree on all doctrinal basics can still differ sharply on emphasis, tone, and spirit, as can be seen in the “Marrow Controversy” in the Church of Scotland during the early eighteenth century when all parties agreed wholeheartedly with the Westminster Confession of Faith, yet a significant

portion of the church was sliding toward legalism. On the other hand, communicating the gospel rightly in your time and place is not just a matter of “how-to” programming.

City. A second major area of a Center Church theological vision has to do with our cultural context. All churches must understand, love, and identify with their local community and social setting, and yet at the same time be able and willing to critique and challenge it. Because Redeemer was a ministry operating in a major urban center, we had to spend time studying the Bible to see what it said about cities in particular — and to our surprise we found that it said a lot. Every church, whether located in a city, suburb, or rural area (and there are many permutations and combinations of these settings), must become wise about and conversant with the distinctives of human life in those places. But we must also think about how Christianity and the church engages and interacts with culture in general. This has become an acute issue as Western culture has become increasingly post-Christian. Churches with similar doctrinal foundations have come to strikingly divergent conclusions about how to relate to culture, and their “Christ and Culture” model always has a drastic impact on ministry expression. Again, the development of a theology of the city and of culture is neither a matter of systematic theology nor of concrete ministry practice. It is an aspect of *theological vision*.

Movement. The last area of theological vision has to do with your church’s *relationships* — with its community, with its recent and deeper past, and with other churches and ministries. Richard Lints points out that one of the elements of a theological vision has to do with our understanding of tradition. Some churches are highly institutional, with a strong emphasis on their own past, while others are anti-institutional, fluid, and marked by constant innovation and change. Some churches see themselves as being loyal to a particular ecclesiastical tradition — and so they cherish historical and traditional liturgy and ministry practices. Those that identify very strongly with a particular denomination or newer tradition often resist change. At the other end of the spectrum are churches with

little sense of a theological and ecclesiastical past that tend to relate easily to a wide variety of other churches and ministries. All of these different perspectives have an enormous impact on how we actually do ministry. Again, they are not included in systematic theology — these issues are not solved by historical confessions or statements of faith. On the other hand, they pose deeper concerns than the practical ministry books can address.¹⁰

THE BALANCE OF THREE AXES

One of the simplest ways to convey the approach to the rest of this volume — and the principles of theological vision under each of these headings — is to think of three axes.

1. The Gospel axis. At one end of the axis is legalism, the teaching that asserts or the spirit that implies we can save ourselves by how we live. At the other end is antinomianism or, in popular parlance, relativism — the view that it doesn't matter how we live; that God, if he exists, loves everyone the same. But the gospel, as we will argue in a later chapter, is neither legalism nor relativism. We are saved by faith and grace alone, but not by a faith that remains alone. True grace always results in changed lives of holiness and justice. It is, of course, possible to lose the gospel because of heterodoxy. That is, if we no longer believe in the deity of Christ or the doctrine of justification, we will necessarily slide toward relativism. But it is also possible to hold sound doctrine and yet be marked by dead orthodoxy (a spirit of self-righteousness), imbalanced orthodoxy (overemphasis on some doctrines that obscure the gospel call), or even “clueless orthodoxy,” which results when doctrines are expounded as in a theology class but aren't brought together to penetrate people's hearts so they experience conviction of sin and the beauty of grace. Our communication and practices must not tend toward either law or license. To the degree that they do, they lose life-changing power.

2. The City axis (which could also be called a Culture axis). We will show that to reach people we must appreciate and adapt to their culture, but we must also challenge and confront it. This is based on the biblical teaching that all cultures have

God's grace and natural revelation in them, yet they are also in rebellious idolatry. If we overadapt to a culture, we have accepted the culture's idols. If, however, we underadapt to a culture, we may have turned our own culture into an idol, an absolute. If we overadapt to a culture, we aren't able to change people because we are not calling them to change. If we underadapt to a culture, no one will be changed because no one will listen to us; we will be confusing, offensive, or simply unpersuasive. To the degree a ministry is overadapted or underadapted to a culture, it loses life-changing power.

3. The Movement axis. Some churches identify so strongly with their own theological tradition that they cannot make common cause with other evangelical churches or other institutions to reach a city or work for the common good. They also tend to cling strongly to forms of ministry from the past and are highly structured and institutional. Other churches are strongly anti-institutional. They have almost no identification with a particular heritage or denomination, nor do they have much of a relationship to a Christian past. Sometimes they have virtually no institutional character, being completely fluid and informal. As we will show later, a church at either extreme will stifle the development of leadership and strangle the health of the church as a corporate body, as a community. To the degree that it commits either of these errors, it loses its life-giving power.

The more that ministry comes “from the center of all the axes,” the more dynamism and fruitfulness it will have. Ministry that is out toward the end of any of the spectrums or axes will drain a ministry of lifechanging power with the people in and around it.

I hope this book will be especially useful for those ministering in urban and cultural centers. But even if you are not literally in such a center, I believe you can still minister “from the center” by being aware of these three axes and adjusting your ministry expressions accordingly.

In the rest of the book, I explain as best I can what it means to center on the three commitments of Gospel, City, and Movement. The Center

Church theological vision is further broken down into eight elements, which are treated in the eight parts of this volume:¹¹

Section 1: GOSPEL

Part 1: Gospel Theology. We seek to be characterized by our gospel-theological depth rather than by our doctrinal shallowness, pragmatism, nonreflectiveness, and method-driven philosophy.

Part 2: Gospel Renewal. A constant note of grace is applied to everything, so that ministry is not marked by legalism or cold intellectualism.

Section 2: CITY

Part 3: Gospel Contextualization. We are sensitive to culture rather than choosing to ignore our cultural moment or being oblivious to cultural differences among groups.

Part 4: City Vision. We adopt city-loving ways of ministry rather than approaches that are hostile or indifferent to the city.

Part 5: Cultural Engagement. We are culturally engaged and avoid being either too triumphalistic or too withdrawn and subcultural in our attitude.

Section 3: MOVEMENT

Part 6: Missional Community. Every part of the church is outward facing, expecting the presence of nonbelievers and supporting laypeople in their ministry in the world.

Part 7: Integrative Ministry. We minister in word and deed, helping to meet the spiritual and physical needs of the poor as well as those who live and work in cultural centers.

Part 8: Movement Dynamics. We have a mindset of willing cooperation with other believers, not being turf conscious and suspicious but eagerly promoting a vision for the whole city.¹²

We are not, then, laying out a “Redeemer model” in this book. This is not a “church in a box.” Instead, we are laying out a particular theological vision for ministry that we believe will enable many churches to reach people in our day and time, particularly where late-modern Western globalization is influencing the culture. This is especially true in the great cities of the world, but these cultural shifts are being felt everywhere, and so we trust that this book will be found useful to church leaders in a great variety of social settings. We will be recommending a vision for using the gospel in the lives of contemporary people, doing contextualization, understanding cities, doing cultural engagement, discipling for mission, integrating various ministries, and fostering movement dynamics in your congregation and in the world. This set of emphases and values — a Center Church theological vision — can empower all kinds of church models and methods in all kinds of settings. We believe that if you embrace the process of making your theological vision visible, you will make far better choices of model and method.

Notes

1. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*. There are many editions of this book, and some are online. This quote is taken from Lecture 2 — “The Call to the Ministry.”

2. Jonathan Edwards, “Christian Charity: The Duty of Charity to the Poor Explained and Enforced,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. E. Hickman (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:171. In this treatise, Edwards uses the phrase “rules of the gospel” to refer to the shape of Christ’s work of salvation (sacrificial self-giving to those who are spiritually poor and bankrupt), which must in turn shape how we behave in the world. He infers from the gospel that we should (1) forgive those who wrong us, (2) give to the poor — even the “undeserving poor,” and (3) help others, even when we cannot afford to. Edwards draws out the implications of Christ’s substitutionary atonement and our free justification for every area of life. He gives us a good example in this essay of how reflection on the core elements of the gospel leads to a commitment to ministry to the poor.

3. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 9.

4. *Ibid.*, 82.

5. *Ibid.*, 315.

6. *Ibid.*, 83.

7. *Ibid.*, 316–17.

8. These three areas correspond roughly to Richard Lints’s four theological vision factors in this way: (1) *Gospel* flows from how you read the Bible, (2) *City* flows from your reflections on culture, and (3) *Movement* flows from your understanding of tradition. Meanwhile the fourth factor — your view of human rationality — influences your understanding of all three. It has an impact on how you evangelize non-Christians, how much common grace you see in a culture, and how institutional (or anti-institutional) you are in your thinking about ministry structure.

9. See D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Revival* (Wheaton, Ill.: Cross-

way, 1982); see also Sinclair Ferguson’s three lectures on the Marrow Controversy, www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?seriesOnly=true&currSection=sermonstopic&SourceID=gpts&keyworddesc=The+Marrow+Controversy&keyword=The+Marrow+Controversy (accessed December 30, 2011).

10. For example, virtually all of the popular church growth books assume that churches have no distinctive ecclesiastical traditions. The volumes treat Reformed, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and Lutheran churches as if they are all alike. But there is no theological or exegetical argument offered for this. It is simply assumed that historical tradition means little or nothing.

11. Some have pointed out that these eight elements cover roughly the same territory covered by Francis Schaeffer in his seminal short book titled *2 Contents, 2 Realities* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1975), based on his address to the first Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization held in July 1974. Schaeffer’s address covers four things he saw as “absolutely necessary if we as Christians are to meet the need of our age and the overwhelming pressure we are increasingly facing” (p. 7). These four things are sound doctrine; contextual, cultural engagement (“honest answers to honest questions”); a spiritual recovering of the gospel for our hearts (“true spirituality”); and remarkable, vital Christian community (“the beauty of human relationships”). I hope the balance of Schaeffer’s elements will be reflected in my similar but somewhat more specific list.

12. Those who are familiar with Redeemer will certainly wonder why preaching doesn’t have its own section in the book. The answer is that it embodies all of the elements of theological vision. You will find, for example, that suggestions on preaching appear in more than half of the eight elements: how to preach for renewal, how to contextualize in your preaching, how to preach in a way that engages culture, and so on.



GOSPEL



The gospel is neither religion nor irreligion, but something else entirely — a third way of relating to God through grace. Because of this, we minister in a uniquely balanced way that avoids the errors of either extreme and faithfully communicates the sharpness of the gospel.

GOSPEL

It is quite easy to assume that if we understand the gospel accurately and preach it faithfully, our ministry will necessarily be shaped by it — but this is not true. Many churches subscribe to gospel doctrines but do not have a ministry that is shaped by, centered on, and empowered through the gospel. Its implications have not yet worked their way into the fabric of how the church actually does ministry. These churches' theological vision has likely arisen from something other than sustained reflection on the gospel.

Gospel-centered ministry is more theologically driven than program driven. To pursue it, we must spend time reflecting on the essence, the truths, and the very patterns of the gospel itself. It is an unfortunate development within the history of

thought in general and the history of the church in particular that has insisted on driving a wedge between theory and practice. The two belong together in dialogical relationship. Theology here is understood to be *fides quaerens intellectum*, the ministry of Christian understanding — an understanding that aims for the church's fitting participation within the drama of God's redemption.* The first section of this book addresses several current discussions and conflicts pertaining to the nature of the gospel itself. In part 1 (Gospel Theology), we look at what the gospel *is* and *is not*. In part 2 (Gospel Renewal), we reflect on the history and patterns of revival — how individual and corporate gospel renewal occurs — and what happens as a result.

* See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*

1 The Gospel Is Not Everything

In the New Testament, the gospel is a *message* about how we have been rescued from peril. The very word *gospel* has as its background a news report about some lifealtering event that has already happened.¹

1. The gospel is good news, not good advice.

The gospel is not primarily a way of life. It is not something we do, but something that has been done for us and something that we must respond to. In the New Testament, the word group *eu-angelion* (good news), *euangelizo* (proclaim good news), and *euangelistes* (one who proclaims good news) occurs at least 133 times.

2. The gospel is good news announcing that we have been rescued.

And what are we rescued *from*? What peril are we saved from? A look at the gospel words in the New Testament shows that we are rescued from the “coming wrath” at the end of history (1 Thess 1:10). But this wrath is not an impersonal force — it is God’s wrath. We are out of fellowship with God; our relationship with him is broken.

In perhaps the most thoroughgoing exposition of the gospel in the Bible, Paul identifies God’s wrath as the great problem of the human condition (Rom 1:18–32). Here we see that the wrath of God has many ramifications. The background text is Genesis 3:17–19, in which God’s curse lies on the entire created order because of human sin. Because we are alienated from God, we are *psychologically* alienated within ourselves — we experience shame and fear (Gen 3:10). Because we are alienated from God, we are also *socially* alienated from one another (v. 7 describes how Adam and Eve must put on clothing, and v. 16 speaks of alienation between the genders; also notice the blame shifting in their dialogue with God in vv. 11–13). Because

we are alienated from God, we are also *physically* alienated from nature itself. We now experience sorrow, painful toil, physical degeneration, and death (vv. 16–19). In fact, the ground itself is “cursed” (v. 17; see Rom 8:18–25).

Since the garden, we live in a world filled with suffering, disease, poverty, racism, natural disasters, war, aging, and death — and it all stems from the wrath and curse of God on the world. The world is out of joint, and we need to be rescued. But the root of our problem is not these “horizontal” relationships, though they are often the most obvious; it is our “vertical” relationship with God. All human problems are ultimately symptoms, and our separation from God is the cause. The reason for all the misery — all the effects of the curse — is that we are not reconciled to God. We see this in such texts as Romans 5:8 and 2 Corinthians 5:20. Therefore, the first and primary focus of any real rescue of the human race — the main thing that will save us — is to have our relationship with God put right again.

3. The gospel is news about what has been done by Jesus Christ to put right our relationship with God.

Becoming a Christian is about a change of status. First John 3:14 (emphasis added) states that “we *have passed* from death to life,” not we *are passing* from death to life.² You are either in Christ or you are not; you are either pardoned and accepted or you are not; you either have eternal life or you don’t. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones often used a diagnostic question to determine a person’s spiritual understanding and condition. He would ask, “Are you now ready to say that you are a Christian?” He recounts that over the years, whenever he would ask the question, people would often hesitate and then say, “I do not feel that I am good enough.”

THE GOSPEL IS NOT THE RESULTS OF THE GOSPEL

The gospel is not about something we do but about what has been done for us, and yet the gospel results in a whole new way of life. This grace and the good deeds that result must be both distinguished and connected. The gospel, its results, and its implications must be carefully related to each other — neither confused nor separated. One of Martin Luther's dicta was that we are saved by faith alone but not by a faith that remains alone. His point is that true gospel belief will always and necessarily lead to good works, but salvation in no way comes through or because of good works. Faith and works must never be confused for one another, nor may they be separated (Eph 2:8–10; Jas 2:14, 17–18, 20, 22, 24, 26).

The gospel is news that creates a life of love, but the life of love is not itself the gospel.

I am convinced that belief in the gospel leads us to care for the poor and participate actively in our culture, as surely as Luther said true faith leads to good works. But just as faith and works must not be separated or confused, so the results of the gospel must never be separated from or confused with the gospel itself. I have often heard people preach this way: “The good news is that God *is* healing and *will* heal the world of all its hurts; therefore, the work of the gospel is to work for justice and peace in the world.” The danger in this line of thought is not that the particulars are untrue (they are not) but that it mistakes effects for causes. It confuses what the gospel *is* with what the gospel *does*. When Paul speaks of the renewed material creation, he states that the new heavens and new earth are guaranteed to us because on the cross Jesus restored our relationship with God as his true sons and daughters. Romans 8:1–25 teaches, remarkably, that the redemption of our bodies and of the entire physical world occurs when we receive “our adoption.” As his children, we are guaranteed our future inheritance (Eph 1:13–14, 18; Col 1:12; 3:24; Heb 9:15; 1 Pet 1:4), and

because of that inheritance, the world is renewed. The *future* is ours because of Christ's work finished in the *past*.

We must not, then, give the impression that the gospel is simply a divine rehabilitation program for the world, but rather that it is an accomplished substitutionary work. We must not depict the gospel as primarily *joining* something (Christ's kingdom program) but rather as *receiving* something (Christ's finished work). If we make this error, the gospel becomes another kind of a salvation by works instead of a salvation by faith.

A related question has to do with whether the gospel is spread by the doing of justice. Not only does the Bible say over and over that the gospel is spread by preaching, but common sense tells us that loving deeds, as important as they are as an accompaniment of preaching, cannot by themselves bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Francis Schaeffer argued rightly that Christians' relationships with each other constitute the criterion the world uses to judge whether their message is truthful — so Christian community is the “final apologetic.”³ Notice again, however, the relationship between faith and works. Jesus said that a loving community is necessary for the world to know that God sent him (John 17:23; cf. 13:35). Sharing our goods with each other and with the needy is a powerful sign to nonbelievers (see the relationship between witness and sharing in Acts 4:31–37 and Acts 6). But loving deeds — even though they embody the truths of the gospel and cannot be separated from preaching the gospel — should not be conflated with it.

The gospel, then, is preeminently a report about the work of Christ on our behalf — that is why and how the gospel is salvation by grace. The gospel is news because it is about a salvation accomplished for us. It is news that creates a life of love, but the life of love is not itself the gospel.⁴

THE GOSPEL HAS TWO EQUAL AND OPPOSITE ENEMIES

The ancient church father Tertullian is reputed to have said, “Just as Jesus was crucified between