



MISSIONAL COMMUNITY

CENTER CHURCH *Part Six*

TIMOTHY KELLER

Missional Community

Center Church, Part 6

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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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A Note to the Reader

This ebook is one part of a larger work called Center Church. The content of this ebook is identical to the larger volume and may contain references to other parts in the original work. We have retained these references for the convenience of the reader.

Center Church outlines a theological vision for ministry—based on classic doctrines but rethinking our assumptions about church for our time and place—organized around three core commitments:

Gospel-centered: The gospel of grace in Jesus Christ changes everything, from our hearts to our community to the world. It completely reshapes the content, tone and strategy of all that we do.

Part 1: Gospel Theology

Part 2: Gospel Renewal

City-centered: Cities increasingly influence our global culture and affect the way we do ministry. With a positive approach toward our culture, we learn to affirm that cities are wonderful, strategic and underserved places for gospel ministry.

Part 3: Gospel Contextualization

Part 4: City Vision

Part 5: Cultural Engagement

Movement-centered: Instead of building our own tribe, we seek the prosperity and peace of our community as we are led by the Holy Spirit.

Part 6: Missional Community

Part 7: Integrative Ministry

Part 8: Movement Dynamics

Additional parts are available as separate ebooks, or you can purchase the original eight-part book in its entirety.

CHAPTER 1

THE SEARCH FOR THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

The word *missional* first became popular after the 1998 publication of the book titled *Missional Church* and in the years since it has been adopted and used widely.¹ Many are asking, “How can we really be missional?” An entire generation of younger evangelical leaders has grown up searching for the true missional church as if for the Holy Grail. Seemingly a dozen books come out each year with the word *missional* in their title, but a survey of these books reveals that the word has significantly different meanings and is used in different ways by different authors, organizations, and churches — leading to much confusion about what, exactly, the term *missional* means.

Before the term *missional* exploded throughout the Christian world, it was primarily used in mainline Protestant and ecumenical circles in a manner closely associated with the Latin phrase *missio Dei*. The phrase was originally coined to convey the teaching of Karl Barth about the action of God in the world. According to Lesslie Newbigin, the term *missio Dei* became prominent after the 1952 world mission conference in Willingen, Germany. It was a way of referring to the idea that God is active in the world, working to redeem the entire creation, and that the church’s task is to participate in this mission.²

In his influential 1991 book *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch explained that the term *missio Dei* was firmly grounded in Trinitarian theology. Bosch noted that in the past, mission was largely viewed as a category of soteriology (as a way to save souls) or as a category of ecclesiology (as a way to expand the church). In contrast, the concept of

missio Dei implied that mission should be “understood as being derived from the very nature of God ... put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology.”³ The Trinity is, by nature, “sending.” The Father sends the Son into the world to save it, and the Father and the Son send the Spirit into the world. And now, said Bosch, the Spirit is sending the church. In short, God does not merely send the church in mission. God already is in mission, and the church must join him. This also means, then, that the church does not simply have a missions department; it should wholly exist to *be* a mission.

At first glance, this seemed to be a strong and sound theology of mission. As time went on, however, it meant the church actually came to be seen as less relevant. Lesslie Newbigin wrote these words in the late 1970s:

*If God is indeed the true missionary, it was said, our business is to not promote the mission of the church, but to get out into the world, find out “what God is doing in the world,” and join forces with him. And “what God is doing” was generally thought to be in the secular rather than in the religious sectors of human life. The effect, of course, was to look for what seemed to be the rising powers and to identify Christians’ missionary responsibility with support for a range of political and cultural developments.*⁴

Harvey Cox of Harvard Divinity School wrote, “What God is doing in the world is politics ... Theology today must [therefore] be that reflection-in-action by which the church finds out what this politician-God is up to and moves in to work along with him.”⁵ In many mainline and ecumenical circles, *mission* came to mean working with secular human rights movements or rising left-wing political organizations. The results, Newbigin wrote, were “sometimes bizarre indeed. Even Chairman Mao’s ‘little red book’ became almost a new Bible.”⁶ Newbigin, who was one of the key people involved in the forming of the World Council of Churches, became increasingly concerned that the concept of the *missio Dei* left little need for the church. The church could not meet human needs as well as social service agencies could, nor could it change society as well as political parties and organizations could. So in this view, the church became inconsequential.

NEWBIGIN AND THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES

Though many evangelicals have appropriated his ideas, Lesslie Newbigin himself never claimed to be an evangelical. He openly repudiated the evangelical doctrine of Scripture and held to the Barthian idea that God's sovereign election of people was not to salvation but only to service. Newbigin, at a number of places in his writing, seems to veer close to universalism.

Nevertheless, as time went on, he became more and more critical of the liberal theology of the WCC. Originally, the WCC was committed to a "Christo-centric universalism"; that is, the denominations of the WCC put all other doctrinal differences aside except their common commitment to Christ in order to make the unity of the church prominently visible as part of its mission to the world. After the appointment in 1992 of Konrad Raiser as general secretary of the WCC, the organization moved to a new position in which the only necessary basis for solidarity in mission was commitment to the transformation of society for justice and peace. Raiser defended his approach in *Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift for the Ecumenical Movement?* Raiser's approach essentially left Christ out of the Trinity. He argued that the Father's will was for justice, peace, and the restoration of creation, and he sent his Spirit out into the world to accomplish this in all sorts of ways, many or most of them having nothing to do with Christianity or the church.

This was the very thing Newbigin had criticized in *The Open Secret*. Newbigin wrote a scathing review of Raiser's book in which he argued that Christ and his atoning death are central to Christian mission, and that, though "I do not want to endorse all that is done by the churches and movements that bear the name 'evangelical' ... it is a very important fact that these bodies are the ones that are growing and showing increasing breadth of vision in their approach to the whole range of contemporary human problems, while the bodies that hold the doctrinal position represented in this book are largely in decline."⁸

In *The Open Secret*, Newbigin criticized what he called the “secularization” of mission. He argued that conversions, the growth of the church, and the quality of Christian community were all critical and central to mission. Newbigin looked with favor on the theories of missiologist Donald McGavran, who taught that the purpose of mission was “church growth” in quality and quantity.⁷ Nevertheless, Newbigin retained the term *missio Dei* and its original theological concept of a missionary God. He insisted that the church needed to grow through evangelism yet be involved in service and in the struggle for justice in the world as well. Newbigin sought to uphold the basic idea of the *missio Dei*, but he tried to save it from the excesses and distortions of the ecumenical movement.

THE NEWBIGIN-BOSCH RESCUE

Lesslie Newbigin had been a British missionary in India for several decades. When he returned to England in the mid-1970s, he saw the massive decline of the church and Christian influence that had occurred in his absence. At the time he left England, Western society’s main cultural institutions still Christianized people, and the churches were easily gathering those who came to their doors through social expectation and custom. Churches in the West had always supported “missions” in overseas non-Christian cultures (such as India). There on the “mission field,” churches functioned in a different way than they did in Europe and North America. Churches in India did not merely support missions or even do missions — they *were* missional in every aspect. They could not simply process Christianized people as churches did in the West. Rather, every aspect of their church life — worship, preaching, community life, and discipleship — had to be a form of mission.

For example, on the mission field, visitors to a worship service could not be expected to have any familiarity with Christianity. Therefore the worship and preaching had to address them in ways both comprehensible and challenging. On the mission field, believers lived in a society with radically different values from those they were taught in church. This made “life in the world” very complicated for Christians. Discipleship and training had to equip believers to answer many hostile questions from their neighbors. It

also had to spell out Christian personal and corporate behavior patterns that distinguished them and showed society what the kingdom of God was all about. In other words, away from the West, churches did not simply have a missions department; Christians were “in mission” in every aspect of their public and private lives.

When he returned to England, Newbigin discovered that the ground had shifted. The cultural institutions of society were now indifferent or overtly hostile to Christian faith, and the number of people who went to church had plummeted. Western culture was fast becoming a non-Christian society — a “mission field” — but the churches were making little adjustment. While many Christian leaders were bemoaning the cultural changes, Western churches continued to minister as before — creating an environment in which only traditional and conservative people would feel comfortable. They continued to disciple people by focusing on individual skills for their private lives (Bible study and prayer) but failed to train them to live distinctively Christian lives in a secular world — in the public arenas of politics, art, and business. All they preached and practiced assumed they were still in the Christian West, but the Christian West was vanishing.

This was a disastrous tactic. Western churches, Newbigin argued, had to put the same kind of thought and effort into reaching their alien, non-Christian culture as the churches in India, China, and the rest of the world did. Over the last twenty-four years of his life, Newbigin argued tirelessly and trenchantly that the church had to come to grips with the fact that it was no longer functioning in “Christendom.” Rejecting the common view that the West was becoming a *secular* society without God, Newbigin viewed it as a *pagan* society filled with idols and false gods.⁹ He especially criticized the ideology of the European Enlightenment and its idolatrous commitment to the autonomy of human reason that had led to the illusion of neutral, value-free, objective knowledge. This commitment to reason had seduced Western cultural leaders into believing we did not need God or any particular religious faith in order to have a well-ordered, just, and moral society. Critical to the church’s mission in the West, he said, was the unmasking of this false god by showing the futility of the “Enlightenment project” — the fruitless effort to find consensus on morality, right and wrong, justice, and human flourishing on the basis of secular reason.

In his books *The Open Secret*, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, and *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, Newbigin fleshed out what mission to Western society could look like.¹⁰ It included a public apologetic against the autonomy of human reason that was overtly indebted to Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Polanyi but that incorporated the approach of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck as well. It also emphasized equipping believers to integrate their faith and work, changing society as they moved out into their vocations in the world, as well as emphasizing the importance of the Christian church as a “hermeneutic of the gospel.” Newbigin believed that the love, justice, and peace that ought to characterize the Christian counterculture were primary ways of bearing witness to God in a pluralistic society. With these last two emphases — the renewal of society and the church as a “contrast” community — Newbigin combines several of the cultural approaches we looked at earlier.

INGREDIENTS FOR A MISSIONARY ENCOUNTER

Newbigin gives his short list of ingredients for a “missionary encounter with Western culture” that includes the following elements:¹¹

1. a new apologetic (that takes on the so-called neutrality of secular reason)
2. the teaching of the kingdom of God (that God wants not only to save souls but heal the whole creation)
3. earning the right to be heard through willingness to serve others sacrificially
4. equipping the laity to bring the implications of their faith into their public calling and so transform culture
5. a countercultural church community
6. a unified church that shows the world an overcoming of denominational divisions
7. a global church in which the older Western churches listen to the non-Western churches

8. courage

Compare this list with David Bosch's short list from *Believing in the Future* summarized in this section.

Most important, Newbigin proposed something of a middle way (though he never used that term) with the *missio Dei*. In his critical review of Konrad Raiser's book defending the approach of the World Council of Churches, he wrote the following:

*Raiser, of course, is absolutely right to protest against an ecclesiocentric concept of mission, as though the church were the author and the goal of mission. But this whole vision is too much shaped by the ideology of the 1960s with its faith in the secular, and in human power to solve problems. The thesis is heavily marked by a model ... that interprets all situations in terms of the oppressor and the oppressed and that tends to interpret the struggles of the oppressed as the instrument of redemption. This model owed not a little to Marxist thought, and the collapse of Marxism as a world power has created a new situation with which the WCC has to come to terms.*¹²

Newbigin rejected the direct identification of God's redemption with any movement that improves socioeconomic well-being. He rightly said that the idea of defining mission as "what God is doing out in history" too closely draws its origins from the Marxist ideas of class struggle as the meaning of history. But then Newbigin sought to strike a note of balance:

The (literally) crucial matter is the centrality of Jesus and his atoning work on the cross, that work by which he has won lordship over the church and the world ...

*It is one of the most pressing tasks for the immediate future to rediscover a doctrine of redemption that sees the cross not as the banner of the oppressed against the oppressor but as the action of God that brings both judgment and redemption for all who will accept it, yet does not subvert the proper struggle for the measure of justice that is possible in a world of sinful human beings.*¹³

Here Newbigin takes the struggle for justice in the world out from the center of the meaning of redemption. Redemption is first of all the action of God in Christ, and this action calls for a decision. It must be accepted, not rejected.¹⁴ And yet there is still a place for us to struggle for the “measure of justice” in this world.

In his book *Transforming Mission*, David Bosch further develops Newbigin’s idea of the *missio Dei*. In Bosch’s examination of Luke’s theology of mission, he sees a charge to proclaim Christ and the call for conversion, as well as to show God’s concern for justice for the poor. In his *Believing in the Future*, Bosch goes further in spelling out a vision for mission in a post-Christian West. He restates the core idea of the *missio Dei* — that God’s mission is to restore creation, and the church is called to participate in this mission. Bosch says that mission is not just “recruitment to our brand of religion; it is alerting people to the universal reign of God.”¹⁵ Then he suggests how this may be done. First, he says, we must avoid two opposing errors: (1) trying to re-create a Christian society (the mistake of medieval Christendom) and (2) withdrawal from society into the “spiritual realm” (the mistake of modernity).¹⁶ Second, we must learn how to publicly and prophetically challenge the idol of autonomous reason and its results.¹⁷ Third, we must take pains to make our churches into contrast societies, countercultures that show society what human life looks like free from the idols of race, wealth, sex, power, and individual autonomy.¹⁸ So we contextualize our message in ways that avoid syncretism on the one extreme and irrelevance on the other; we better equip the laity for their public callings; and we cultivate vital, life-shaping worship as the dynamic heart of mission. These steps show the world a countercultural model of society and shape people so that the gospel influences how they live in the world.¹⁹ Finally, we must model to the world as much unity between churches as is practically possible.

An insight animating all of this work is the idea of *the cultural captivity of the church* in the West. Bosch, like Newbigin, is especially critical of Enlightenment rationalism and its various effects in Western culture — materialism, consumerism, individualism, and the breakdown of community. He maintains that the church is too deeply shaped by the spirit of the age, in *both* its conservative and liberal forms. In its liberal form, it

has bought uncritically into a secular account of things, de-supernaturalizing the gospel so that the Spirit's work is seen mainly in secular movements of liberation, thus turning the liberal mainline churches into little more than social service centers where the language of secular rights activists reigns. In its conservative form, it has bought uncritically into the idea of religion as the fulfillment of individual consumer needs, thus turning the conservative church into something like felt-need shopping centers where the language of modern therapy and marketing reigns. People see Christ as a way to self-fulfillment and prosperity, not as a model for radical service to others. Both wings of the Christian church are, then, captive to the reigning idols of Western culture.²⁰ They are failing to challenge these idols in their preaching and practice.

Because of the influential writings of Newbigin and Bosch, a new, more fully realized understanding of the *missio Dei* was developing by the mid-1990s. It sought to avoid the secularization of mission found in the liberal churches. The overarching narrative was still that God is in mission to renew the whole creation, but the new view stressed the public proclamation of Christ as Lord and Hope of the world and therefore the necessity of both conversion and the growth of the church. This new, rehabilitated view of the *missio Dei* began to capture the attention of many Christians outside of the liberal mainline who were struggling with the question of how to relate to an increasingly post-Christian culture.

THE MISSIONAL CHURCH MOVEMENT TODAY

When *Missional Church* (edited by Darrell Guder) first appeared in 1998, it built on this new understanding of *missio Dei* that had been previously developed by Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch. The book laid out the same dilemma: the culture was no longer Christianized and now the church was “on the mission field to the modern world,” yet the church was captive to the culture of modernity and thus had no real alternative to offer. The church must therefore reform itself and discover new ways to engage culture. But how was this to be done? Again, the answers sounded many of the same themes as Newbigin and Bosch: the church as a contrast community, contextualization of the message, concern not only for church growth but also for justice. The book's theological commitments were

firmly based on the concept of the mission as participation in the purpose of the triune God to redeem creation.²²

WHY DID WE LOSE CHRISTENDOM?

What caused Christianity to lose so much influence in the West, especially after World War II? Lesslie Newbigin understands historical patterns as being caused by ideas and intellectual trends working their way out through a society's institutions. He blames the outworking of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment — promoting the sufficiency of individual human reason with no need for faith in God—for a great deal of the shift.

Ross Douthat's book *Bad Religion* provides a somewhat different and illuminating account of the loss of Christendom in the United States after World War II. He attributes the change to five major social catalysts:²¹

1. political polarization between left and right, which took many churches captive (mainline Protestants toward the left, evangelicals toward the right) and weakened credibility
2. the sexual revolution and the birth control pill that fueled it
3. the dawn of globalization and the impression that Christianity was imperialistically Western
4. the enormous growth in the kind of material prosperity that always works against faith
5. the loss of the elites and the academic cultural institutions they control (see ch. 2, "The Locust Years")

I see no reason why Newbigin's history-of-thought approach and Douthat's sociology-of-knowledge approach cannot both be right. A third strain of analysis could easily find the faults within the church itself. As H. Richard Niebuhr points out in his essay "Toward the Independence of the Church," the church becomes weak and even corrupt when it becomes successful in a culture.²⁵

For example, why did the mainline and the evangelical church get co-opted by American political parties and lose credibility? Was it not due to a lack of robust, vital orthodoxy within these bodies? For more, see the discussion of Niebuhr's essay and this dynamic in part 5 of this book (pp. 237 – 38). If all these approaches are indeed complementary and their conclusions are on point, Christianity in the West has been the victim of “a perfect storm” of trends, factors, and forces.

The time for these ideas was ripe, and the term “missional church” became popular in evangelical circles. The evangelical church as a whole was becoming aware of the cultural shift happening around them and the growing ineffectiveness of much of the traditional ministry approach. Some in the mainline church were becoming disenchanted with the emptiness of ecumenical theology, but they were either unable or not interested to join the evangelical movement. Many of these church leaders picked up the basic vision for the missional church in Western culture found in Guder's book.

But many people picked up the ideas of the *missio Dei* and the missional church and supplemented them with other theological and cultural content, which has led to a dizzying variety of different and sometimes contradictory definitions of the term *missional*. Craig Van Gelder has written an entire volume just trying to categorize the different approaches and definitions around the idea. He and his colleague Dwight Zscheile have discerned four broad, overlapping “streams” of the missional conversation:

1. Being missional is being evangelistic. Some churches (and authors) have simply adopted *missional* as a synonym for being highly committed to evangelism and foreign missions. Like all expressions of being missional, the starting point is how our culture has changed, how outreach requires more ingenuity and diligence than ever, and the assertion that every Christian is a missionary. Those in this category also usually embrace a somewhat more holistic approach to outreach, encouraging various forms of community service. However, the underlying theology is quite traditional. Mission is largely conceived as bringing people into individual salvation

through the church. The distinctive ideas of the *missio Dei* — the work of God’s Spirit in the world to restore all creation and the cultural captivity of the Western church — are missing.²³

2. Being missional is being *incarnational*. Another set of voices criticizes the Christendom model of church as “attractional.” The attractional model is based on non-Christians coming or being invited into the programs and ministries of the church. They come in to hear the preaching, to participate in programs that minister to their felt needs, or to attend for baptisms, weddings, and funerals. This, it is said, is now an obsolete model (though it still works in more traditional parts of the West and with the shrinking body of “Christianized” non-Christians).

In place of the attractional model, they recommend an incarnational model, where Christians live geographically close to each other, create a thick and rich community among themselves, and then become deeply involved in the civic and corporate life of their neighborhood or city. Church planting in this paradigm does not need to begin with a full-time minister, a core group, and a worship service. Instead, a few Christian families move into a neighborhood and fully participate in its life, discover the needs of the citizens, and begin to meet them in Christ’s name. Christian community grows organically, gradually coming to include many of the nonbelievers who labor for peace and justice in the neighborhood. In general, the adoption of this view leads to the proliferation of informal house churches.²⁴

3. Being missional is being *contextual*. Some thinkers put more emphasis on the shifts in late modern and postmodern culture, the cultural captivity of the church, and therefore the need to contextualize every part of the church’s ministry so it engages this post-Christendom reality. This approach includes aspects of the first two views, as thinkers in this category emphasize being ingeniously evangelistic and incarnational in the community — but they go further. In this view it is possible to deepen Christian community and be involved in community service and yet still be a subculture that does not really engage post-Christian Western society. To be a truly missional church involves deep reflection on culture and discovering creative ways of communication and church practice that both adapt to culture and challenge it. Those who fall into this category

appreciate the incarnational house church model but see it as one good and possible ministry form among many others.

Van Gelder and Zscheile list authors who advance this view, and many of them seem to assume a more traditional evangelical theology than those in the final category.²⁶ Still, they all accept that the basic measures proposed by Newbigin for a “missionary encounter with Western culture” — a new apologetic, the church as contrast community, holistic outreach, engaging culture through vocations — are correct. In their own works, they seek to flesh out what Newbigin’s measures might look like.

4. **Being missional is being reciprocal and communal.** This group of thinkers applauds the emphases of the other three. They are glad to affirm that every Christian is in mission. They support the idea of the church as far more incarnationally involved in the life of its community, and they believe firmly in the importance of contextualization and cultural engagement. They do not, however, believe the others have taken the implications of the *missio Dei* far enough. They believe *missio Dei* calls us to a careful reworking of both our theology and practice.

SELF AND THE FULFILLMENT OF ITS NEEDS

Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren have more to say about the impact of individualism:

When we attend to the way people talk about the gospel, it does not take long to discover just how much the focus lies on meeting personal needs. During testimony sessions about mission trips, people explain how it changed them or how it gave them an experience they will never forget. In modernity the purpose of life is to fulfill one’s personal destiny, goals, or needs ... For moderns, it’s almost impossible to read the biblical narrative without assimilating it to the modern categories of the self and the fulfillment of its needs.

In Scripture, mission calls a people into a radically different vision on a journey bigger and other than ourselves. Scripture calls us into the memory of an amazing story ... not for ourselves but for

the sake of the world. The strangeness of this story is its illogical and irrepressible meaning: find life by losing it; only by leaving the places of security are the purposes of God discovered. The God revealed in Scripture gives himself away for the sake of the world.²⁷

Those who adopt this approach have arrived at two conclusions. First, if God already has a mission, then a church should not do mission by designing methods to draw people into their services. It must be responsive to what God is already doing in the world. Alan Roxburgh, one of the original essayists in *Missional Church*, writes that the one question missional churches ask over and over is this: “What is God up to in this neighborhood?” The missional church listens to people in the community and “becomes open to being surprised by God’s purposes.”²⁸ Rather than simply announcing to the world what it needs to know, the church listens and learns what God is doing and then gets involved.

Second, in order to overcome the Enlightenment’s individualism, the church must redefine sin, mission, and salvation in corporate and communal terms. Rather than speaking of sin primarily as an offense against a holy God, sin is seen, in horizontal terms, as the violation of God’s shalom in the world through selfishness, violence, injustice, and pride.²⁹ Rather than speaking of the cross as primarily the place where Jesus satisfied the wrath of God on our sin, Jesus’ death is seen as the occasion when the powers of this world fell on Jesus and were defeated.³⁰ Mission, then, is ultimately not about getting individuals right with God but about incorporating them into a new community that partners with God in redeeming social structures and healing the world.³¹

WHAT DO THESE APPROACHES HAVE IN COMMON?

Many conservative evangelicals reject the term *missional* because of its association with emerging church thinkers such as Brian McLaren, because of its connection to the ecumenical movement and the theology of Karl Barth, or simply because it is such a hard word to define.³²

I sympathize. But the fact remains that a large number of Christian believers today are on an earnest search for the missional church, regardless of whether or not they use the term. Those who hold to conservative doctrines often inhabit the first category — “missional as evangelistic” — and are now beginning to populate the second and third categories — “missional as incarnational” and “missional as contextual.” Those with liberal and mainline church beliefs are also found in the second and third categories but are especially attracted to the fourth category (“missional as reciprocal and communal”).³³

Despite very real and important differences among these four missional streams, I believe they have important things in common. In the remainder of the chapter, I’ll summarize the primary areas of consensus and strength in the missional conversation.

THE POST-CHRISTENDOM AGE

First, we have entered a post-Christian or post-Christendom age. For centuries in the Western world, the Christian church had a privileged place, but this is no longer true. Rather than being a force at the center of culture, Christianity has moved to the margins. There is broad recognition that the church had allowed cultural institutions to do a lot of its heavy lifting, infusing people with a broadly Christian way of thinking about things — respect for the Bible, allegiance to the Ten Commandments, commitment to the ethical teachings of the Gospels; belief in a personal God, an afterlife, a judgment day, and moral absolutes. But no longer can we expect people who already have these basic beliefs to simply come to church through social pressure and out of custom. The times have changed.

CULTURAL CAPTIVITY OF THE CHURCH

Second, those in the incarnational, contextual, and communal/reciprocal streams further recognize the cultural captivity of the church and the need to contextualize the gospel message so it is both comprehensible and challenging for those in a pluralistic, late-modern society. Many call for a gospel that escapes cultural captivity by challenging the Enlightenment individualism of both secular people and certain members of evangelical

churches. Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren write, “Modernity replaces mission with self-actualization of the expressive, autonomous individual,”³⁴ and it is this individualism that must be challenged and confronted. Newbigin argues that the church must also unmask the autonomy of human reason. Remember that contextualization means showing how only in Christ can the baseline narratives of a culture be resolved. To the self-absorbed culture we say, “You must lose yourself — in service to Christ and others — to truly find yourself.” To the rationalistic culture we say, “You cannot have the things you want — meaning, dignity, hope, character, shared values, and community — without faith.”

sent out to be a blessing

Third, all those pursuing the missional church also believe that Christian mission is more than just a department of the church, more than just the work of trained professionals. The biblical God is by nature a sending God, a missionary God.³⁵ The Father sends the Son; the Son sends the Spirit and his disciples into the world. Therefore the whole church is in mission; every Christian is in mission. God never calls you in to bless you without also sending you out to be a blessing (Gen 12:1–3; cf. 1 Pet 2:9). So a Christian is not a spiritual consumer, coming in to get his or her emotional needs met and then going home. A missional church, then, is one that trains and encourages its people to be in mission as individuals and as a body. All of the voices in the missional conversation agree that the church must not be *only* attractional; it also must equip and send the laity into the world to minister.

One implication of this view is that missional churches must equip laypeople both for evangelistic witness and for public life and vocation. In Christendom, you could afford to train people solely in prayer, Bible study, and evangelism — skills for their private lives — because they were not facing radically non-Christian values in their public lives. In a missional church, all people need theological education to “think Christianly” about everything and to act with Christian distinctiveness. They need to know which cultural practices reflect common grace and should be embraced, which are antithetical to the gospel and must be rejected, and which practices can be adapted or revised.³⁶

A CONTRAST COMMUNITY

Finally, most missional thinkers agree that in our Western culture, we must be *a contrast community, a counterculture*. The quality, distinctiveness, and beauty of our communal life must be a major part of our witness and mission to the world. Jesus stated that the quality and visibility of Christians' love for each other will show the world that the Father *sent* him (John 17:20–21). In other words, our mission cannot go forward without Christians being involved not only in calling people to conversion but also in service to the community and in doing justice.³⁷ This is part of the balance Newbigin struck. While many in the liberal church redefine evangelism as seeking a more just society and many conservative churches see Christians' work in the world as strictly proclamation and conversion, most missional thinkers agree that the witness of Christians must be in both word and deed.

WHAT IS A “MISSIONAL” SMALL GROUP?

A missional mind-set can and should pervade every area of the church. For example, let's consider what a missional small group could look like. It is more than just a group of people involved in a specific evangelism program (although that is a good thing). Rather, its members love the city and talk positively about it; they speak in language that is not filled with pious tribal or technical terms and phrases, nor do they use disdainful or combative language. In their Bible study, they apply the gospel to the core concerns and stories of the people in their culture. This is a group obviously interested in and engaged with the literature, art, and thought of the surrounding culture, and they can discuss it appreciatively and yet critically. They exhibit deep concern for the poor, are generous with their money, model purity and respect toward the opposite sex, and show humility toward people of other races and cultures, as well as toward other Christians and churches.

Part of being this kind of counterculture involves loving the city — its culture and people. Often, churches gather around them people who do not like the city or who do not expect to stay there. This inclination can occur among conservative churches that despise the secular, immoral society around them or with churches comprised largely of expatriates or immigrants from other countries. Such churches are often indifferent or hostile to their own locale, and as a result, most of the long-term residents of the community will feel unwelcome in these churches. A missional church enjoys, cares for, and prays for its city.

Another aspect of this contrast community is unity across church communities and denominations. In Christendom, when “everyone was a Christian,” it was perhaps useful for a church to define itself primarily in contrast with other churches. Today, however, it is much more illuminating and helpful for a church to define itself in relationship to the values of the secular culture. If we spend our time bashing and criticizing other kinds of churches, we simply play into the common defeater that all Christians are intolerant. While it is right to align ourselves with denominations that share many of our distinctives, at the local level we should cooperate with, reach out to, and support the other congregations and ministries in our local area. To do so will raise many thorny issues, of course, but our bent should be in the direction of cooperation.

I believe these points of common ground in the missional conversation are sound and generally consistent with a Center Church theological vision. I would use the phrase “missional church” less cautiously and more expansively if these were indeed understood to be the key aspects of the definition.

Still, as fruitful as the search for the missional church has been, it has not always taken the church into friendly or helpful territory. Significant and important differences exist among various groupings in the missional conversation. In the next chapter, I’ll look at key dangers and imbalances induced by some of the thinkers and practitioners in the missional conversation and suggest some course corrections.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION
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1. Keller writes, “The word [*missional*] has significantly different meanings and is used in different ways by different authors, organizations, and churches — leading to much confusion about what, exactly, the term *missional* means.” How have you used or defined *missional*? How has this chapter changed or contributed to your understanding of this term?
2. The concept of *missio dei* suggests that “God does not merely send the church in mission. God already is in mission, and the church must join him.” What do you believe is the mission of God and what role does the church have in that mission? How would you distinguish between the mission of God and the mission of the church?
3. Of the four understandings of “missional” presented in this chapter, which most closely aligns with your own? What is it about the other understandings that you find objectionable?
4. Four common emphases characterize those who embrace the idea of being missional:
 - acknowledging that we have entered a post-Christian age in the West
 - recognizing the cultural captivity of the church and the need to contextualize the gospel for a pluralistic society
 - affirming that mission is the job of every Christian
 - calling the church to be a contrast community

What are some of the unique elements of each emphasis that are discussed in this chapter? Which of these resonated most with you as you read about them? Which is the most difficult to persuade others of within your community?

CHAPTER 1 — THE SEARCH FOR THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

1. Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 18.
3. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991), 389–90 (the quotes in this paragraph are from these pages).
4. Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 18.
5. Harvey Cox, *The Secular City* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), 255.
6. Newbigin, *Open Secret*, 18.
7. *Ibid.*, 121–23.
8. Lesslie Newbigin, “Ecumenical Amnesia,” in *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 18.1 (January 1994): 2–5, www.newbigin.net/assets/pdf/93reit.pdf (accessed February 15, 2012).
9. In *The Open Secret*, Newbigin writes of “the paganism that was showing its power in the heart of old Christendom” (p. 8).
0. *The Open Secret* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); *Foolishness to the Greeks* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986); *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).
1. Lesslie Newbigin, “Can the West Be Converted?” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 11.1 (January 1987): 2–7.
2. Newbigin, “Ecumenical Amnesia,” 4–5, www.newbigin.net/assets/pdf/93reit.pdf (accessed February 15, 2012).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Newbigin’s phrase “judgment and redemption for all who will accept it” could be interpreted to mean that all people who accept it receive both conviction of sin (judgment) and the acceptance of grace.
5. David Bosch, *Believing in the Future: Toward a Missiology of Western Culture* (Valley Forge, Pa.: Trinity Press International, 1995), 33.
6. *Ibid.*, 33–35.
7. *Ibid.*, 47–53.
8. *Ibid.*, 56–57.
9. *Ibid.*, 55–62. Bosch lists many of these ingredients briefly at the end of the book. He includes addressing ecological issues and listening carefully and respectfully to the theological insights and personal experiences of the churches of the Third World.
0. David Bosch criticized not only the practices of both the liberal and the conservative churches but also their doctrine, particularly their view of Scripture, as being shaped by modernity. For

example, in *Transforming Mission* (p. 342), he wrote, “The subject-object dichotomy [of the Enlightenment] meant that, in admittedly very opposite ways, the Bible and, in fact, the Christian faith as such, became objectified. Liberals sovereignly placed themselves above the biblical text, extracting ethical codes from it, while fundamentalists tended to turn the Bible into a fetish and apply it mechanically to every context, particularly as regards the ‘Great Commission.’ ”

1. Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012).
2. The book is a compendium of essays from different authors and so does not speak always with one voice. While Newbigin himself was able to mix Transformationist measures with Counterculturalist measures in his agenda for cultural engagement, many of the contributors to *Missional Church* fell more into one camp or the other. For a good discussion of the book and its message and the differences among the authors, see Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011).
3. Van Gelder and Zscheile call this group “‘Discovering’ Missional,” who “tend to utilize missional language to promote a more traditional understanding of mission” (p. 71), i.e., those who consider “mission” to be primarily an expanding of the church rather than joining with God to renew the creation. (The label is a bit patronizing, since the authors depict them as still discovering the concept but not really understanding it.) They cite Frank Page, *The Nehemiah Factor* (Birmingham, Ala.: New Hope, 2008), and Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson, *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, Colo.: Group, 2004) as examples of this group (see lists of authors on pp. 72 – 74).
4. The seminal text for this approach is Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004). See also the books and website of David Fitch of Reclaiming the Mission (www.reclaimingthemission.com). I also recommend the books of Tim Chester and Steve Timmis; see esp. *Everyday Church: Mission by Being Good Neighbours* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity, 2011).
5. H. Richard Niebuhr, “Toward the Independence of the Church,” in *The Church Against the World*, ed. H. Richard Niebuhr, Wilhelm Pauck, and Francis P. Miller (Chicago: Willett, 1935), www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=412&C=194 (accessed February 7, 2012).
6. Van Gelder and Zscheile list Jim Belcher of Deep Church, Dan Kimball, and me, among others (p. 87). I would include Ed Stetzer here as well.
7. Ibid., 59–60.

8. Alan J. Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Become One* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 93. Van Gelder and Zscheile (*Missional Church in Perspective*) state that a missional theology calls the church to “reciprocity, mutuality, and vulnerability” (p. 133); because the Trinity is seen as a nonhierarchical, mutual community of persons, the missional church must have a reciprocal, open, and dynamic relationship to the world (p. 110).
9. For one of many places where this horizontal reworking of sin and redemption is carried out, see N. T. Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2006). Wright states, “Evil is the force of anti-creation, anti-life, the force which opposes and seeks to deface and destroy God’s good world of space, time, and matter, and above all God’s image-bearing human creatures ... [But] it is true, as the Gospel writers have been trying to tell us, that evil at all levels and of all sorts had done its worst and that Jesus ... supremely on the cross had dealt with it, taken its full force, exhausted it” (p. 89).
10. See Wright, *Evil and the Justice of God*. “The New Testament writers report ... the remarkable sign of evil doing its worst and being exhausted. When Jesus suffered, he did not curse, and when he was reviled, he did not revile in return” (pp. 88 – 89). “The death of Jesus is seen ... as the means whereby evil is ... defeated and its power is exhausted” (p. 136).
11. Van Gelder (*Missional Church in Perspective*), who puts himself in this category, criticizes thinkers who don’t embrace the implications in the *missio Dei* of what he calls “the social Trinity.” He argues that putting the emphasis on the fact that God is a community of mutual love who is redeeming all of creation will keep us from seeing “individual Christians as the focus of God’s redemptive work” and will strengthen “the communal nature of the church as well as the corporate nature of discipleship”(p. 84).
12. Despite the fact that Brian McLaren and others in the Emergent network adopted the term, Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren (*Introducing the Missional Church*, 47 – 62) show that the emerging church and the missional church are not the same thing. Indeed, as I will argue, it is possible to properly use the term *missional* without buying into the mainline/ecumenical definition of the *missio Dei*. Much of the work of the mainline-oriented missional church thinkers (represented by the “reciprocal and communal” group) seems to have Karl Barth’s shadow behind much of it. Barth reworks the doctrine of election so that (in his view) all people are elect in Christ, even those who do not believe, so that all human beings are essentially *simul justus et peccator*. There is much controversy over how Barth’s view works itself out in ministry practice, but many who accept it deem it inappropriate to view non-Christians as being under the wrath of God and in need of personal reconciliation. It is not hard to see how this would move the focus of a church’s ministry from calling individuals to conversion to building community and healing society.

13. Conservative evangelicals in particular should bear in mind that the theology of Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch, while not evangelical, may still be appreciated as a reaction and critique of the thoroughly secular theology of many of the churches that make up the World Council of Churches.
14. Roxburgh, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 59.
15. See John R. W. Stott, "The Living God Is a Missionary God," in *You Can Tell the World*, ed. James E. Berney (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1979), 3–9, www.963missions.com/Stott_TheLivingGod.pdf (first presented at the 1976 Urbana Student Missions Convention).
16. See more on this subject in part 5 ("Cultural Engagement") and in part 7 ("Integrative Ministry"), as well as a full treatment in chapter 21 ("Equipping People for Missional Living").
17. Those who lean toward a conservative theology may say (as I would) that while the mission of the church qua church (the institutional church) is to evangelize and make disciples, individual Christians must be well-known for their sacrificial service to the poor and common good if a society is going to give the gospel a hearing.

CHAPTER 2

CENTERING THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

Though a clear and valuable benefit exists in identifying the common ground of the missional church, the range of differences among various definitions and viewpoints is great, and many aspects of the visions for “missional living” contradict each other. Everyone involved in the missional conversation concludes that others are making significant errors, and I am no different in this regard. As I have observed the ongoing conversation about the missional church and tested many of these ideas as a practitioner, I have three primary concerns with the way some segments of the missional conversation are appropriating the core insights outlined at the end of the previous chapter. We need to learn how to discern and avoid each of these problems if we are to be effective in developing a ministry with a Center Church orientation.

PROBLEM #1: NOT COMPREHENSIVE ENOUGH

First, we examine the branch of the conversation that sees the missional church as simply being evangelistic. I agree that any missional church must be pervasively, intensely evangelistic in the common use of the word — we must call people to personal conversion. However, the typical evangelical gospel presentation is too shallow. It speaks cursorily about a God whom we have sinned against, a Savior who died for our sins, and a call to believe in this Savior. The simplicity of this communication presumes that those listening share the same essential understanding of the words *God* and *sin* as the speaker.

But what if a growing majority of people outside the church live by such a radically different view of life that much of what is now said and done by the Christian community is inexplicable or even deeply offensive to them? What if many listeners hold a profoundly different understanding of the concepts of God, truth, right and wrong, freedom, virtue, and sin? What if their approaches to reality, human nature and destiny, and human community are wholly different from our own?

For decades, this has been the situation facing Christian churches in many areas around the world — places such as India, Iran, and Japan. Evangelism in these environments involves a lengthy process in which nonbelievers have to be invited into a Christian community that bridges the gap between Christian truth and the culture around it. Every part of a church's life — its worship, community, public discourse, preaching, and education — has to assume the presence of nonbelievers from the surrounding culture. The aesthetics of its worship have to reflect the sensibilities of the culture and yet show how Christian belief shapes and is expressed through them. Its preaching and teaching have to show how the hopes of this culture's people can find fulfillment only in Christ. Most of all, such a congregation's believers have to reflect the demographic makeup of the surrounding community, thereby giving non-Christian neighbors attractive and challenging glimpses of what they would look like as Christians.

One reason much of the evangelical church in the United States has not yet experienced the same precipitous decline as the Protestant churches of Europe and Canada is that, unlike these places, the U.S. still includes sizable remnants of Christendom. We have places where the informal public culture (though not the formal public institutions) still stigmatizes non-Christian beliefs and behavior. There is, according to journalist Michael Wolff, a “fundamental schism in American cultural, political, and economic life. There's the quicker-growing, economically vibrant ... morally relativist, urban-oriented, culturally adventuresome, sexually polymorphous, and ethnically diverse nation ... And there's the small-town, nuclear-family, religiously oriented, white-centric other America, [with] ... its diminishing cultural and economic force ... two countries.”¹

To reach this growing post-Christendom society in the West will obviously take more than what we ordinarily call an *evangelistic* church; it will take a *missional* church. This church's worship is missional in that it makes sense to nonbelievers in that culture, even while it challenges and shapes Christians with the gospel.² Its people are missional in that they are so outwardly focused, so involved in addressing the needs of the local community, that the church is well-known for its compassion. The members of a missional church also know how to contextualize the gospel, carefully challenging yet also appealing to the baseline cultural narratives of the society around them.³ Finally, because of the attractiveness of its people's character and lives, a missional church will always have some outsiders who are drawn into its community to incubate and explore the Christian faith in its midst.

So the idea that "to be missional is to be evangelistic" is too narrow. A missional church is not *less* than an evangelistic church, but it is much more.

PROBLEM #2: TOO TIED TO A PARTICULAR FORM

A second major problem is the tendency to put too much emphasis on a particular church form. Many who participate in missional church discussions insist that the church should be incarnational rather than attractional.⁴ If taken as a broad principle, this is a correct statement. That is, if an attractional church is understood as tribal, as showing little concern for the broader community, drawing people in from the world and absorbing them into internal church programs that only meet their felt needs rather than equipping them to serve — then a missional church should not be attractional.⁵ And if *incarnational* can be defined as a church that listens to its community to learn what its needs are, speaks and interacts with its community with respect, equips and sends its people out to love and serve — then all missional churches should be incarnational.

However, many argue that any church that bases its ministry on bringing people in to a large weekly meeting cannot be missional. David Fitch, a pastor in the missional community Life on the Vine, writes the following about megachurches:

*Mega-church ... packages a service to speak a message that they assume can make sense to anonymous guests. Missional assumes the opposite — that people have no language or history by which to understand the words “Jesus is Lord.” Therefore we must incarnate/embody the gospel for it to make sense. A packaged entertaining speaker/program every Sunday simply cannot do the job of communicating the gospel in post-Christendom.*⁶

Fitch asserts that non-Christians in a post-Christian society will be so completely unable to understand the gospel that any mere verbal presentation of it will not be compelling or understood. In addition, he argues that any church that focuses on a large weekly gathering will by necessity require too much time and money for the church to be missional. For Fitch, to be missional is “to spend most of one’s time and ministry outside the four walls of a church building, inhabiting a neighborhood learning who they are, what they do, and where the spiritual/holistic needs are. Its rhythm contradicts the rhythm of an attractional church.”⁷

Many believe, along with Fitch, that a missional church cannot take the form of a large church or even of a small traditional church that is centered on a weekly worship and preaching service. Those who hold this view organize either as small house churches (ten to fifty people) with bivocational pastors and leaders or as a network of midsize house churches that gather for larger “attractional” meetings occasionally.

MISSIONAL COMMUNITIES

A practical resource for creating a missional church is Mike Breen’s *Launching Missional Communities: A Field Guide*.⁸ Key attributes of a missional community include:

- **Size.** A missional community is larger than six to twelve persons, the size of a typical small cell group. Small groups tend to be inwardly focused; also, most small groups do not endure for a long time. Instead, missional communities of twenty to fifty persons are more like the size of an extended family. Groupings of this size are said to be “large enough to dare; small enough to care.”

- **Focus.** These communities meet regularly for fellowship and mutual edification and also to take responsibility to serve and reach a particular neighborhood or group of people. Examples mentioned in *Launching Missional Communities* include serving a Slovakian gypsy population, Somali refugees, university students, a wealthy neighborhood, a poor neighborhood, young parents, Iranians (including Muslims), and parents of teenagers.
- **Center of gravity.** “The center of gravity” in this church form is the midsize missional community, *not* the large, weekly worship gathering. Small groups are optional, and large worship gatherings are often episodic or nonexistent. Breen suggests that missional communities meet with others for preaching and celebration in a Sunday large worship gathering “no less than once a month and no more than three times a month.”

Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch address this model:

Most of the emerging churches we have been able to uncover are quite intentional about developing smaller communities ... It is also much closer to New Testament ecclesiology and missions practice. The household church unit was the primary unit of missional community in the New Testament. Today whether they meet in homes like the contemporary house church movement or not is irrelevant. What is important is that they tend to be smaller, more diverse, less organized, life-oriented, missional, relational, faith communities, not requiring their own specialized churchy buildings.⁹

I believe this view presents too rigid an understanding of the missional church. I pastored a small church in a small, working-class town for nearly ten years. My church naturally had the kind of characteristics that house churches are seeking to create through intentional planning. Missional communities seek to re-create the *oikos* — the large, extended family of children, grandchildren, relatives, business associates, and neighbors that constituted most churches in the New Testament — and insist that ministry should be informal, relational, and organic.¹⁰

However, the mid-sized groups that are gathered into missional communities are not truly *oikoi*. They are usually not related to each other by a variety of blood ties, do not work in the same shops and plants, have not gone to the same schools, and have not belonged to the same clubs and civic organizations — which is how people in a small town know one another. The Christians in my church did not have to find ways to know their geographic neighbors; they were already deeply enmeshed with them. All the believers lived within a few miles of one another and rarely moved out of the area. We ate together, spent lots of time in each other's homes, and were deeply involved in each other's lives apart from Sunday services. And because of these durable and multivalent relationships, a great deal of outreach, pastoral care, fellowship, and community service did indeed happen organically through relationships. In short, small churches in small towns have, in general, the kind of relationships with each other and the surrounding community that missional communities seek to forge.

For more than twenty years, I've led a very large church in Manhattan in which we have significant mobility and turnover and in which people learn, do ministry, and are cared for mainly through large-scale programs. My conclusion? Both churches had seasons of evangelistic fruitfulness. In many cases, the traditional gathered church does tend to draw people "inside the walls" instead of sending and supporting Christians out to minister in their networks of relationships. However, in my own experience, my large urban congregation — particularly in its first decade — was, by and large, far more effective than the small church I served in reaching unchurched and non-Christian people. In the final analysis, I don't believe any single *form* of church (small or large, cell group based or midsize community based) is intrinsically better at growing spiritual fruit, reaching nonbelievers, caring for people, and producing Christ-shaped lives. I say "in the final analysis" because each approach to church — the small, organic, simple incarnational church, and the large, organizational, complex attractional church — has vastly different strengths and weaknesses, limitations and capabilities.

Alan Roxburgh, in his role as a consultant, finds that one of the first questions people ask him is this: "Can you show me a missional church model?"¹¹ They want a specific way of doing church, with a concrete pattern they can emulate. He rejects the very question, and so should we.

Look again at the outline of the features of an effective missional church (pp. 256–58). Those features can be present or absent within any church model and size. Nearly any type of church may embrace or resist these features, though in different ways. All kinds are thriving; and all kinds are failing.

So the idea that “the missional church is the smaller house church” is shortsighted.

PROBLEM #3: LOSS OF A CLEAR UNDERSTANDING OF THE GOSPEL

My third and greatest concern is that, while all missional church books use the term *gospel* constantly, it is obvious they do not mean the same thing by the term. This is a very serious problem. It is especially true of those who see being missional primarily in communal/reciprocal terms (though it occurs in the other categories as well).

The final result of God’s redeeming work in Christ will be a completely renewed cosmos — a new heaven and a new earth. Therefore we can say that God is out not only to pardon and save our souls but also to heal all the ways sin has ruined the creation. However, some stress this aspect of God’s saving program to the virtual exclusion of any attention to individual conversion. The reason is, as we have seen, that many redefine sin and salvation in completely corporate or horizontal terms. In their view, sin is mainly the selfishness, pride, greed, and violence that destroy community and God’s creation. Accordingly, Christ’s redemption is primarily the defeat of the forces of evil in the world that cause the harm, and the Spirit’s application of this redemption is by means of tearing down barriers and moving toward a human society of sharing, egalitarianism, and mutuality. Finally, becoming a Christian is not about being reconciled to God through repentance and faith but about joining the new community that is at work to bring about a world of peace and justice. The classic doctrines regarding sin — as an offense against God’s holiness that incurs his righteous wrath, as Christ propitiating God’s wrath and taking our punishment as our substitute, and as the “great exchange” of our sin being placed on Jesus and his righteousness being placed on us — are rejected as too individualistic and as a contributing reason for the church’s failure to become missional. Of

course, as we have observed many times in this book, sin has a devastating effect on our corporate life, and Christ's redemption surely will eventually restore creation, but when these traditional doctrines of sin and atonement are discarded, the corporate dimension virtually eliminates the call for individual repentance, faith, and conversion.

REWORKING THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

While we cannot unpack all of the theological assumptions that underlie the reworking of the concept of salvation into corporate terms, one premise, it seems to me, is a *one-dimensional view of the kingdom of God*. According to Geerhardus Vos (see pp. 229 – 30), the kingdom of God is “the realm of God’s saving grace” that is entered by the individual through the new birth. The doctrine that we are justified through faith in Jesus’ finished work — not our own — can easily be put in kingdom terms. Jesus is “King” of our salvation — he fully accomplishes it; we contribute nothing. Vos then notes that the kingdom of God is also “a realm of righteousness, justice, and blessing” that has a social-future dimension.

Many today seem to place all the stress on the social dimension of the kingdom, which they pit against the idea of salvation through Christ’s imputed righteousness. Another premise is a belief in the social Trinity, a view that puts much more emphasis on the three-ness of God than his unity and stresses God as a nonhierarchical, loving community rather than emphasizing his holiness.¹² Finally, those who do this redefining of the doctrine of salvation often embrace a background belief in the Barthian understanding of all humans as elect in Christ and therefore not under God’s judicial wrath.

It should be acknowledged that the writers in this category continually speak of individual and corporate redemption in such phrases as “not only individual salvation but also” or “more than individual salvation” as a way

of indicating that they are not denying or changing traditional evangelism but rather adding to it. But upon reflection, I find that the individual and corporate aspects of salvation, mission, and Christian living are often pitted against one another, and the individual aspect nearly eliminated. These doctrinal shifts result in a very different way of understanding a local church's mission. As mentioned in chapter 5, using the concept of sphere sovereignty, it is best to think of the organized church's primary function as evangelizing and equipping people to be disciples and then sending the "organic church" — Christians at work in the world — to engage culture, do justice, and restore God's shalom. In many expositions of the missional church, this distinction virtually disappears.¹³

Most important, this overly corporate definition of sin and salvation results in a very different way of doing evangelism. Let me give one example. This way of reconceiving sin and redemption (as corporate and horizontal rather than as individual and vertical) was given popular-level expression by Dieter Zander, a pioneer of the emerging church. In an article titled "Abducted by an Alien Gospel," he relates how his aunt shared the gospel with him when he was a child. She said, "If you are lying, you are committing a sin. If you die tonight without having your sins forgiven, you will go to hell." That night, Zander asked Jesus to forgive all his sins and come into his life, and he went to bed sure of eternal life.

After moving as an adult to the San Francisco area, Zander tried talking to a Jewish neighbor about Christianity. What he shared was essentially what he had known of the gospel since childhood: "God loves us, but we've all sinned. God sent Jesus to pay for our sins, and if we trust in Jesus' payment, God will forgive our sins and give us eternal life." But as he spoke, he not only found his gospel presentation ineffective; he found himself thinking, "This just doesn't sound like good *news*."

Going back to Scripture, he came to realize that the heart of Jesus' gospel was "the kingdom of God." And what was this? "The arrival of a different kind of life, under the reign of a present and powerful God who, according to another version of Jesus' good news in Luke 4, was intent upon restoring, healing, redeeming, and reconciling all of creation." Here Zander follows the basic contours of the *missio Dei*. With his new understanding of the kingdom of God as a "different kind of life" and the restoration of all

creation, he redesigned his gospel presentation and returned to his Jewish friend:

I no longer believe that being a Christian is just a matter of having my sins forgiven ... The good news that Jesus announced is that we can live our lives with God—which is the best kind of life that is humanly possible. We don't have to live life alone — taking care of ourselves, being afraid that we don't have what we'll need, being intimidated and controlled by things in our life that we can't seem to change, wondering if there's anything or anyone who can make sense of the whole thing.

Jesus' message is, simply, "Turn around and step into a life with God, the kind of life I lived and invite you to live with me."

When we accept Jesus' invitation, believe that what he is saying is true, and follow him with our whole life, we experience freedom from past sins and future fears, along with contentment, joy, love, and power today.¹⁴

Zander reports that his neighbor responded more positively this time. He concludes his article by saying that we must "bring to people the same message that Jesus brought: the offer of life with God and the invitation to be his coworker in what he is doing in the world."

This article vividly captures how our conception of *missio Dei* will play a significant role in what we actually share with people as the gospel. The gospel of Zander's childhood (let's call it the AG for "alien gospel") was indeed inadequate. First, the AG offers an extremely thin concept of sin. Sin is seen as merely breaking the rules, for which you need forgiveness. There is no hint of sin as the deep and settled bent of the heart toward self-salvation and idolatry. Because the AG's account of sin is so shallow, listeners do not get the sense either that their sin is deeply unfair, wrong, and offensive to God or that it is profoundly destructive of their own lives. Instead, this view of sin as "rule breaking" leads listeners to see that their only problem is the legal consequences of the sin they face from the Divine Enforcer. Nothing in this presentation shows sin as intrinsically wrong, hateful, destructive, and shameful in itself.

As a result of this thin view of sin, the AG does not really clarify the classic gospel distinction between grace and works, between faith in Christ's saving work and faith in our own saving work. The average hearer

of the AG will see themselves as saved, not primarily because of Jesus' death on the cross, but because they are sincerely submitting to God and begging for mercy and resolving to live a better life. Essentially, they do not see themselves as moving from faith in their own moral efforts (whether as secular or religious persons) to faith and rest in Christ's saving work. Rather, they see themselves as moving from living bad lives to living better ones. Their sins are forgiven, and God accepts them *because* they are now living for Jesus — not the other way around.

When we look at Zander's redesign of the gospel (let's call it the KG for "kingdom gospel"), we find that it doesn't actually change this pattern at all. First, there is still no mention of the cross or why it was necessary for Jesus to die. In fact, there is no mention of Jesus' saving work at all. The emphasis is not on Jesus as substitute but on Jesus as a model of living a particular kind of courageous and loving life ("step into ... the kind of life I lived and invite you to live with me"). Second, in order to receive both forgiveness of sins and power within, we must "believe that what he is saying is true, and follow him with our whole life." Instead of being invited to believe and rest in the saving work of Christ, there is an invitation to stop living in one way and start living in another. The listener to Zander's gospel can easily conclude the same thing they did when they heard the AG: "If I live in the right way, then I'll be forgiven and accepted."

In the end, the AG and the KG are not much different. Both of them tell you that Jesus died for your sins and that you need to receive that forgiveness. So far, so good. But both messages fail to present the offensiveness, depth, and destructiveness of sin, and therefore they miss the "sharp point" of the gospel's spear — the distinction between grace and works, between embracing Jesus as your Savior and merely using him to be your own savior. As we have shown at length earlier in this book, it is understanding and applying this distinction that creates the power for life change. People who believe they are accepted by God because they are leading a traditionally moral, chaste, and good life or because they are living a life of sacrificial service for the needs of the world will be equally insecure, unable to take criticism, prone to look down on people who are not "getting it right," and unsure of God's love or of their identity in Christ. Both are still essentially enslaved to the bonds of works-righteousness. It

doesn't matter if it takes a traditional, conservative, moralistic form or a culturally progressive, justice-oriented, kingdom-restoration form.

Evangelicals who describe the gospel as Dieter Zander does will almost always, when asked, profess belief in a traditional understanding of justification by faith. But many others — proponents of the missional church who are outside of the evangelical tradition — have rejected its traditional views of justification and substitutionary atonement. Many will say that talking about the wrath of God and the need for justification simply doesn't work today. Postmodern people, they say, won't find the doctrine of justification by grace compelling because they perceive God, if he exists at all, as someone who accepts them as they are without any need for atonement or radical grace. In the KG presentation, people are called, not to be reconciled to God, but to step out of a life of fear and self-absorption into a life of reliance on God and service to others. You are left with the impression that God has no problem with you — you are just shortchanging yourself by failing to belong to his movement. There is no real barrier to be overcome between you and God, other than your reluctance to join his work. I struggle to see how this approach differs in essence from the AG — the classic “salvation by works” way of understanding salvation. It is salvation by a different kind of works. Instead of offering a contextually sensitive starting place for a gospel presentation, it gives us an entirely different definition of salvation altogether, one that is by works rather than by grace.

It naturally follows that this understanding of sin leads to a different understanding of conversion. Traditional Protestantism believed that conversion was more than simply the adoption of a new set of values; it was seen as a radical change in inner identity. The driving motivation of your life was now rooted in grateful wonder and in love for the One who did so much for you. The old motivations of fear and pride were swept away by God's radical grace. But all of this is muted in the kingdom presentation. When someone hears the KG gospel of submitting to Jesus as Lord and joining his kingdom community, how can they sing Charles Wesley's cathartic refrain from “And Can It Be That I Should Gain”?

My chains fell off, my heart was free,

I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.

What chains? Set free from what, exactly? The biblical gospel brings people to see their peril in light of God's holiness while simultaneously becoming aware of the costly and amazing sacrifice of Jesus, who took upon himself the punishment we deserve. If this is muted in our gospel presentations, we also mute that sense of wonder at the astonishing love of Jesus, the one who has rescued us.

D. A. Carson, in a lengthy review article of various authors who share many similarities with the views of Lesslie Newbigin, David Bosch, and Darrell Guder, wrote the following:

We have repeatedly seen how the "story" of God's advancing kingdom is cast in terms of rescuing human beings and completing creation, or perhaps in terms of defeating the powers of darkness. Not for a moment do I want to reduce or minimize those themes. Yet from what are human beings to be rescued? Their sin, yes; the powers of darkness; yes. But what is striking is the utter absence of any mention of the wrath of God. This is not a minor omission. Section after section of the Bible's story turns on the fact that God's image bearers attract God's righteous wrath. The entire created order is under God's curse because of human sin. Sin is not first and foremost horizontal, social (though of course it is all of that): it is vertical, the defiance of Almighty God. The sin which most consistently is said to bring down God's wrath on the heads of his people or on entire nations is idolatry — the de-godding of God. And it is the overcoming of this most fundamental sin that the cross and resurrection of Jesus achieve. The most urgent need of human beings is to be reconciled to God. That is not to deny that such reconciliation entails reconciliation with other human beings, and transformed living in God's fallen creation, in anticipation of the final transformation at the time of the consummation of all things. But to speak constantly of the advance of the kingdom without tying kingdom themes to the passion narrative, the way the canonical Gospels do, is a terrible reductionism.¹⁵

Carson's point is vital. There are most definitely corporate and horizontal aspects in both sin and redemption. These biblical concepts are deep, comprehensive, and far-reaching. But if in the effort to bring these

horizontal aspects out more clearly we deny the classic doctrines of grace, then the result will be a destructive imbalance. The classic Protestant understanding of the gospel includes the notion that God is holy and we are under his wrath and curse, but that Jesus bore in our place that wrath, curse, and punishment. When we repent and believe in him, we are given both pardon and Christ's righteousness. This electrifying experience of God's grace makes a Christian passionate for doing justice — for pursuing the horizontal aspects of the gospel. A Christian's zeal for justice comes from a transformed identity that flows from a grasp of the gospel — a gospel proclaiming that salvation is by faith alone, not by works.

THE MARKS OF A MISSIONAL CHURCH

Where does this bring us? I am arguing that a church can robustly preach and teach the classic evangelical doctrines and still be missional. That is, it can still have a missionary encounter with Western culture *and* reach and disciple unchurched, nontraditional nonbelievers in our society. How so?

1. A missional church, if it is to have a missionary encounter with Western culture, will need to confront society's idols and especially address how modernity makes the happiness and self-actualization of the individual into an absolute. One of the manifestations of this idol is materialism — consumerism and greed that lead to injustice. As we have seen, many believe that in order to have this confrontation we must recast the gospel, but as I explained elsewhere at length, the classic messages of substitutionary atonement and forensic justification provide both a strong theological basis and a powerful internal motivation to live more simply and to do justice in the world.¹⁶ Rejecting these doctrines, then, does not aid us in this encounter with Western culture. In fact, nothing challenges and confronts the modern idolization of the “expressive, autonomous individual” like the simple and ancient gospel message that we all are sinners under God's wrath who need to repent and submit to him.

A WESTERN CULTURE APOLOGETIC

When Lesslie Newbigin spoke of a “missionary encounter” with the West, he included the idea of apologetics — of making a case. Almost all people in the contemporary missional conversation cite Newbigin’s call for the church to be a “contrast community,” but they generally ignore what he said about engaging people intellectually. Many missional theorists today say that using arguments and reason to persuade people simply will not work in a postmodern situation. Instead, people will be won by the quality of our community and the vividness of our stories. But just as all people are unavoidably emotional beings, they are also unavoidably rational beings. It is obvious that the most forceful enemies of Christianity — the “new atheists” — use reason to undermine the faith, and these arguments are having some effect.

Newbigin believed that Christians need to expose the myth of the modern world — that a person can jettison any faith in God and rest only on science and naturalism, and yet still have meaning in life, a basis for human dignity, moral consensus, hope for the future, strength of character, shared values, and a strong community. A Western cultural apologetic means showing the world that it *cannot* have these things without faith in God.¹⁷

2. A missional church, if it is to reach people in a post-Christian culture, must recognize that most of our more recently formulated and popular gospel presentations will fall on deaf ears because hearers will be viscerally offended or simply unable to understand the basic concepts of God, sin, and redemption. This fact does not, however, require a change in the classic Christian doctrines, but rather skillfulness in contextualizing them so our gospel presentations are compelling even to people who are not (yet) fully persuaded by them. Within Christendom, it was possible to simply exhort Christianized people to do what they knew they should do. As I explained at length in part 3, Christian communicators now must enter, challenge, and retell the culture’s stories with the gospel. And, as I argued there, it is the traditional gospel of salvation by sheer grace that gives us both the internal confidence and the humility to do contextualization.

3. A missional church will affirm that all Christians are people in mission in every area of their lives. We must overcome the clericalism and lay passivity of the Christendom era and recover the Reformation doctrine of “the priesthood of all believers.” Again we can see that classic doctrines of salvation do not obscure this critical idea. Its great proponent was Martin Luther, who associated this “ministry egalitarianism” with the doctrine of free justification rather than through works and merit, which can lead to a hierarchical view that ministry is only for the holy and for those removed from the world.¹⁸ To be missional today requires that lay Christians be equipped by their churches to do three things: (1) to be a verbal witness to the gospel in their webs of relationships, (2) to love their neighbors and do justice within their neighborhoods and city, and (3) to integrate their faith with their work in order to engage culture through their vocations. A missional church will be more deeply and practically committed to deeds of compassion and social justice than traditional fundamentalist churches and more deeply and practically committed to evangelism and conversion than traditional liberal churches. This kind of church is profoundly counterintuitive to American observers, who are no longer able to categorize (and dismiss) it as liberal or conservative. Only this kind of church has any chance in the non-Christian West. A church that equips its people in this way will not only be something like a lay seminary in discipleship and training; it will also find ways to strongly support the people in their ministering “outside the walls” of the church.¹⁹ This aspect of missional ministry is so important that I am devoting the next chapter to it.

4. A missional church must understand itself as a servant community — a counterculture for the common good. For centuries in the West, churches could limit themselves to specifically “religious” concerns and function as loose fellowships within a wider semi-Christian culture. Now, however, becoming a Christian involves a much more radical break with the surrounding non-Christian culture. The church can no longer be an association or a club but is a “thick” alternate human society in which relationships are strong and deep — and in which sex and family, wealth and possessions, racial identity and power, are all used and practiced in godly and distinct ways. However, while the Christian church must be

distinct, it must be set within, not be separated from, its surroundings. Its neighbors must see it as a servant society, sacrificially pouring out its time and wealth for the common good of the city.

Here again I would argue that this emphasis on deep and countercultural community is not undermined by the classic Reformation doctrines of justification and imputation but rather is enhanced by them. No one has argued more compellingly for this than Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his classic *Life Together*.²⁰ As Bonhoeffer shows, the gospel decenters the ego and clears the way not only for far deeper and more transparent relationships between Christians (helping to make the church a contrast community) but also for humble, servant relationships with people who do not share our beliefs. The sacrificial service of a missional church will show the world, then, a “third way” between the individualistic self-absorption that secularism can breed and the tribal self-righteousness that religion can breed.

DISCOURSE IN THE VERNACULAR

In Christendom, there is little difference between the language inside and outside the church. Documents of the early United States Congress, for example, were riddled with allusions to and references from the Bible, and at that time even nonchurchgoers understood theological terms. In a missional church, however, terms must be explained, and we should always assume that nonbelieving people are present. If we speak as if our *whole neighborhood* is present (not just Christians), eventually more and more of our neighbors will find their way in or be invited there.

So missional churches must seek to intentionally avoid tribal jargon, stylized and archaic language for prayer and worship, “we/they” language, disdainful jokes that mock people who hold different political and religious beliefs, and dismissive or disrespectful comments about those who differ with them. Churches seeking to discourse in the vernacular avoid both sentimentality and hype. Instead, their communication should be marked by gentle humor

and honest realism about the leaders' and the church's weaknesses and mistakes, yet seasoned with a ground note of joy and hope that never diminishes. And unless all of their speech flows out of truly humble and bold, gospel-changed hearts, it will be seen as nothing more than marketing and spin.

THE CHURCH'S ROLE IN SEEKING JUSTICE

I have argued in *Generous Justice* and elsewhere in this volume that while the mission of the *gathered* (institutional) church is to proclaim the gospel of individual salvation, to win people to Christ and form disciples, yet the will of God for the church *dispersed*—Christians living in the world — is to minister in both word and deed, to do evangelism and to do justice. If the latter does not minister in both word and deed, no one will listen to the gospel preached by the former.

So in the end, the missional church sends its people out as agents of justice in the world. However, we need to be more careful than those who see social reform as the church's job — a view that usually leads to the politicization of the church in which it becomes identified with particular political parties and causes. Ross Douthat argues that this error has contributed to the decline of orthodox Christianity.²¹

5. A missional church must be, in a sense, “porous.” That is, it should expect nonbelievers, inquirers, and seekers to be involved in most aspects of the church's life and ministry — in worship, small and midsize groups, and service projects in the neighborhood. A missional church knows how to welcome doubters and graciously include them as much as possible in community so they can see the gospel fleshed out in life and process the gospel message through numerous personal interactions.²² This will only happen if all of the above ingredients are in place and if believers inside the church are themselves “contextual” — that is, culturally like yet spiritually

unlike the people in the surrounding neighborhood and culture.²³ A missional church, then, does not depend on an evangelism program or department to do outreach. Almost all parts of the church's life must be ready to respond to the presence of people who do not yet believe.

6. A missional church should practice Christian unity on the local level as much as possible. In the heyday of Christendom, churches received definition by contrasting themselves with (and constantly criticizing) other denominations and traditions. Today we should define ourselves more by contrasting ourselves with the world and our surrounding culture. The world must see churches avoiding unnecessary divisions.²⁴

Six Marks of a Missional Church

1. The church must confront society's idols.
2. The church must contextualize skillfully and communicate in the vernacular.
3. The church must equip people in mission in every area of their lives.
4. The church must be a counterculture for the common good.
5. The church must itself be contextualized and should expect nonbelievers, inquirers, and seekers to be involved in most aspects of the church's life and ministry.
6. The church must practice unity.

These six marks of a missional church can exist in both large and small churches of various forms and are strengthened, not weakened, by a clear grasp of the understanding of the gospel that was recaptured by the Protestant Reformers. Most of these marks have been or will be expanded on in other parts of this volume. There is one, however, that I think is the most practical single way a church can implement a missional mind-set — *training and equipping the people of the church for ministry*. We will focus our attention on that priority in the next chapter.

<h3>QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION</h3>

1. Do you agree with this chapter's assertion that no "single *form* of church ... is intrinsically better at growing spiritual fruit, reaching nonbelievers, caring for people, and producing Christ-shaped lives?" Be honest about your own biases — which form is most popular in your context? Why? How might this form be adapted to be more missional?
2. Consider Dieter Zander's story in which he compares the "alien gospel" and the "kingdom gospel." How are these two gospels similar to one another? How does the biblical gospel differ from both of them?
3. Keller writes, "The classic Protestant understanding of the gospel includes the notion that God is holy and we are under his wrath and curse, but that Jesus bore in our place that wrath, curse, and punishment. When we repent and believe in him, we are given both pardon and Christ's righteousness. This electrifying experience of God's grace makes a Christian passionate for doing justice — for pursuing the horizontal aspects of the gospel." Which do you tend to emphasize more in your preaching and teaching, the horizontal or the vertical? How are these two aspects of the gospel connected?
4. Six marks of a missional church are presented in this chapter. A missional church should:
 - confront society's idols and address how modernity makes the desires of the individual into an absolute
 - contextualize skillfully and discourse in the vernacular, recognizing that many people are simply unable to understand the basic concepts of God, sin, and redemption
 - recognize that all Christians are people in mission in every area of their lives
 - understand itself as a servant community — a counterculture for the common good
 - be contextualized and expect nonbelievers, inquirers, and seekers to be involved in most aspects of the church's life and

ministry

- practice Christian unity on the local level as much as possible

For each of these marks, what unique challenges and opportunities does it provide for communicating the gospel? Which of these does your church need to focus on right now?

CHAPTER 2 — CENTERING THE MISSIONAL CHURCH

1. Michael Wolff, “The Party Line,” *New York* (February 26, 2001), <http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/media/columns/medialife/4407/index1.html> (accessed February 17, 2012).
2. See chapter 23 for an extended discussion of “evangelistic worship.”
3. See part 3 (“Gospel Contextualization”) for an extended discussion of what a contextualized gospel message looks like.
4. A number of good theological and practical objections can be raised to habitually using the word *incarnational* to describe ministry. However, for our purposes here, we will accept the practice and the main definition given because the term is widely used in missional church discussions.
5. Alan Roxburgh and Scott Boren (*Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How to Become One* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009], 69) define an “attractional” church this way: “One of the ways the basic story of the gospel has been compromised is that it has become all about us and how God is supposed to meet our needs, and we have created attractional churches that are about how God does just that.”
6. David Fitch, “What Is Missional? Can a Mega-Church Be Missional?” www.reclaimingthemission.com/what-is-missional-can-a-mega-church-be-missional/ (accessed February 17, 2012).
7. Ibid.
8. Mike Breen and Alex Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities: A Field Guide* (Pawleys Island, S.C.: 3DM, 2010).
9. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 211.
0. See Frost and Hirsch, *The Shaping of Things to Come*, 210 – 24.
1. Roxburgh and Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church*, 21.

2. See Leanne Van Dyk, “The Church’s Proclamation as a Participation in God’s Mission,” in *Trinitarian Theology for the Church: Scripture, Community, Worship*, ed. Daniel J. Treier and David Lauber (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2009), 225–36; see also Mark Husbands, “The Trinity Is *Not* Our Social Program,” in the same volume (pp. 120–41), where he critiques the social Trinity emphasis.
3. For example, Darrell Guder (*Missional Church* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998]) reasons that if God’s purpose in mission is to “restore and heal creation” (p. 4), then the idea of salvation means bringing the reign of God to bear on communities and organizations. He writes, “For a bank, it might mean granting loans in formerly redlined neighborhoods. For a public school, it might mean instituting peer mediation training among students” (p. 136).
4. Dieter Zander, “Abducted by an Alien Gospel,” www.baskettcase.com/blog/2006/11/01/abducted-by-an-alien-gospel/ (accessed February 17, 2012).
5. D. A. Carson, “Three Books on the Bible: A Critical Review,” www.reformation21.org/shelf-life/three-books-on-the-bible-a-critical-review.php (accessed February 17, 2012).
6. Timothy Keller, *Generous Justice: How God’s Grace Makes Us Just* (New York: Dutton, 2010), esp. 92–108.
7. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 1–65.
8. While Luther expounds on this concept in many places, the two seminal works are “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation” and “The Babylonian Captivity of the Church.” These two are joined to “The Freedom of a Christian” in Martin Luther, *Three Treatises* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1970). For an early modern evangelical effort to recapture the importance of lay ministry, see John R. W. Stott, *One People* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1968).
9. For a case that every lay Christian is to minister the Word — that is, evangelize and disciple from the Bible — see Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-Shift That Changes Everything* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2009), 41–60. For resources containing ideas on how to release laypeople to deepen relationships in their neighborhood to do service and witness, see Breen and Absalom, *Launching Missional Communities*, and Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church: Mission by Being Good Neighbours* (Nottingham, UK: InterVarsity, 2011). For a brief overview of how to help people integrate their faith and work, see part 7 (“Integrative Ministry”) in this volume, and Timothy Keller, *Every Good Endeavor* (New York: Dutton, 2012).
10. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Life Together* [New York: Harper & Row, 1954], 23) writes, “All we can say, therefore, is: the community of Christians springs solely from the biblical and Reformation

message of the justification of man through grace alone; this alone is the basis of the longing of Christians for one another.”

1. Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion: How We Became a Nation of Heretics* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 63ff.
2. See section on “Missional Evangelism through Mini-Decisions” on pp. 281–82.
3. See section on “Believers with Relational Integrity” on pp. 282 – 85.
4. See part 8 (Movement Dynamics).

CHAPTER 3

EQUIPPING PEOPLE FOR MISSIONAL LIVING

Until now, we've spent most of our time trying to understand the missional conversation, discerning some of its commonalities and strengths as well as its errors and pitfalls. One recurring theme is the importance of equipping and involving the laity in ministry. Under Christendom, people simply came to the church to receive the ministrations of the professional clergy. We can no longer assume that people will come. This should not be taken to imply that the ordained ministry is obsolete — by no means! It is the responsibility of the ordained leadership to build up the church and its members through the ministry of the Word and sacraments. However, one critical focus of that ministry must now be the discipling of the laity for ministry in the world. This is one of the most practical ways a church can appropriate the insights of the missional conversation, moving toward a centered, balanced approach to ministry.

We find an example of this idea in an interview conducted with Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger of Fuller Seminary. When asked, “What are the marks of churches (people) that live missionally?” Bolger provides a helpful and practical answer: “They no longer see the church service as the primary connecting point with those outside the community. Connecting with those outside happens within the culture, by insiders to that culture who express the gospel through how they live.”¹

The rest of this chapter will propose different ways and means for equipping and encouraging the laity to engage in ministry “within the culture.” I give special emphasis to the lay ministry of the Word — the

building up of believers and the evangelizing of nonbelievers through preaching and teaching — though in part 7, I will point to some other ways that Christians can do ministry in the world, including the practice of justice and the integration of faith and work.

“INFORMAL MISSIONARIES”

There has always been a strong tendency, as John Stott says, for Christians to “withdraw into a kind of closed, evangelical, monastic community.”² This is not, of course, how things were in the early church. The Greek word *euangelizo* means “to gospelize,” to tell people the good news about what Jesus did for us, and in the book of Acts literally everyone in the early church does it. Not only the apostles (5:42) but every Christian (8:4) did evangelism — and they did so endlessly. Passages such as Romans 15:14; Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 1:6–10; Hebrews 3:13; and 1 John 2:20, 27 indicate that every Christian was expected to evangelize, follow up, nurture, and teach people the Word. This happened relationally — one person bringing the gospel to another within the context of a relationship.

In Michael Green’s seminal *Evangelism in the Early Church*, he conveys the conclusion of historians that early Christianity’s explosive growth “was in reality accomplished by means of informal missionaries.”³ That is, Christian laypeople — not trained preachers and evangelists — carried on the mission of the church not through formal preaching but informal conversation — “in homes and wine shops, on walks, and around market stalls ... they did it naturally, enthusiastically.”⁴

Green quotes pagan writers such as Celsus, who complained with great sarcasm that “we see in private houses ... the most illiterate and bucolic yokels, who would not dare to say anything at all in front of their elders and more intelligent masters. But they get hold of ... any ... who are as ignorant as themselves and say ... ‘We know how men ought to live. If your children do as we say, you will be happy yourselves and make your home happy too.’” Green writes, “In fact, of course, it pays the highest compliment to the zeal and dedication of the most ordinary Christians in the subapostolic age. Having found treasure, they meant to share it with others, to the limits of their ability.”⁶

ORIGEN AND GREGORY

In *Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michael Green gives an extended account of how the future Saint Gregory was won to faith by Origen. When Gregory was eighteen, he and his brother were traveling to study law at Beirut, then one of the most famous schools in the world. But on their journey there they came to Caesarea in Palestine where they met the famous scholar Origen. He persuaded the brothers to remain for a while and let him tutor them in the history of philosophy. They stayed, and to their surprise Origen did not keep the traditional distance of professor and pupil but opened his life to them as a friend. Gregory stayed and received his full education under Origen for seven years and in the process was converted to Christianity.⁵

Green is careful to point out that not all evangelism in the early church was informal. In his chapter titled “Evangelistic Methods,” he speaks of many forms of evangelism that required great training and expertise, including synagogue preaching and open-air preaching, as well as public teaching and “dialogical” evangelism. Early Christian teachers set up academies (schools for instruction in the faith) but also taught science, mathematics, philosophy, and the humanities from a Christian perspective. The great Catechetical School of Alexandria was one, and we know that Justin Martyr started one such school in Rome. Green shows that many non-Christians came to take classes, listen to lectures, and dialogue with teachers. The original example of this form of evangelism may have been the apostle Paul’s lecturing in the public hall of Tyrannus in Ephesus. There he engaged in *dialeghomenos* — interactive dialogue with all comers — about the Christian faith daily for two years (Acts 19:9–10). Green writes, “The intellectual content of his addresses must have been very stimulating. Here was a man who could hold his own, and presumably make converts, in the course of public debate.”⁷

But Green returns to the most important way that Christianity spread — through the extended household (*oikos*) evangelism done informally by

Christians. A person's strongest relationships were within the household — with blood relatives, servants, clients, and friends — so when a person became a Christian, it was in the household that he or she would get the most serious hearing.⁸ If the head of the household (Greek, *oikos*) became a believer, the entire home became a ministry center in which the gospel was taught to all the household's members and neighbors. We see this in Acts 16:15, 32–34 (Lydia's and the jailer's homes in Philippi); Acts 17:5 (Jason's home in Thessalonica); Acts 18:7 (Titius Justus's home in Corinth); Acts 21:8 (Philip's home in Caesarea); and 1 Corinthians 1:16; 16:15 (Stephanas's home in Corinth).

The home could be used for systematic teaching and instruction (Acts 5:42), planned presentations of the gospel to friends and neighbors (Acts 10:22), prayer meetings (Acts 12:12), impromptu evangelistic gatherings (Acts 16:32), follow-up sessions with the inquirers (Acts 18:26), evenings devoted to instruction and prayer (Acts 20:7), and fellowship (Acts 21:7).

If another member of the household became a Christian — the wife, children, or slaves and laborers — then the gospel would spread more indirectly. In his chapter titled “Evangelistic Methods,” Green sketches out the different ways the gospel moved through households, depending on who was the first convert.

We also know from the Bible and early historical records that simple friendship was one of the main carriers of the gospel. We see this in John 1 when Philip passes his knowledge of Jesus on to his friend Nathanael. Green relates how Pantaenus led Clement of Alexandria to Christ, Justin led Tatian, and Octavius led Minucius Felix to Christ — all through friendship, which was taken very seriously by the ancients.⁹

THE LAY MINISTRY DYNAMIC

What does this “every-member gospel ministry” look like in today's world? Here are several examples:

- Jerry is asked by his work colleague Bill how his weekend went. Jerry relates that he went on a men's retreat that provided spiritual resources for forgiving people who have wronged us over the years. When Bill raises his eyebrows and says, “That's interesting,” Jerry takes a small

plunge and mentions that the thing that helped him most was the idea that even though he has not given God his due, God offers him forgiveness through Jesus.

- Dan and Jill help their two sons, ages five and seven, with Scripture memorization and teach them a simple catechism. They field the boys' questions and help them understand the meaning of the texts they are studying.
- Sally gets to know a young woman named Clara at church. Clara confides that she and her husband are having marriage problems and he isn't willing to go to a counselor. Sally and her husband, Jeff, invite Clara and Sam over for a meal. Sam hits it off with Jeff. Afterward, Clara convinces Sam to meet with Jeff and Sally to talk about their marriage issues. They meet together once a month for four months, studying Ephesians 5 and several other biblical texts on marriage.
- John comes to church with his wife, but he isn't sure what he believes or where he stands on faith. The pastor introduces him to an elder named Tom, who begins meeting with John on occasion to read and discuss a book about basic Christianity. After two meetings, John agrees to study the gospel of Mark with Tom every two or three weeks.
- Jenny begins coming to a small group in the church. She was raised in the church but has so many doubts and questions that her group leader, Beth, begins meeting with her one-on-one. They study Bible passages and read books that address each of her questions, one after the other.
- Ted is a young single lawyer. He knows several other lawyers who go to church with him, though they don't work for his firm. He decides to have a Super Bowl party for several of his non-Christian colleagues and invites two Christian lawyers from church and a couple of other believers as well. The men and women from his workplace hit it off with the lawyers from church. About three months later, one of them shows up in church with one of Ted's friends.
- Jessica meets Teresa, a new believer, at church and invites her to work through a series of six Bible studies for new Christians (on issues such as prayer, Bible reading, the role of the church, understanding the gospel better, etc.).

- Fred has been attending a small group for months. At one point he realizes that he assesses the value of the group strictly on what he gets out of it. He then decides to begin preparing well (studying the passage) and praying for the group. When he comes, he looks for every opportunity to help the Bible study leader by making good contributions and for ways to speak the truth in love so others are encouraged and helped to grow.
- Catherine prays for her friend Megan for months. Megan responds well to two short books on Christian subjects that Catherine has given her. She then invites Megan to an evangelistic event in which Christian truth is presented. On the way home, she fields Megan's questions.
- Joe has a longtime friend from college days named Pete, who is a musician. Pete's performance anxiety is harming his career. Joe has been a sympathetic listener for some time, but finally he bluntly asks Pete to explore the Christian faith with him. "I think maybe it's the only thing that will help you overcome your problem." Pete is taken aback, but after a while, he expresses interest, mainly out of desperation. Joe warns him, "If Christianity is going to be any help, it will only be if you come to the belief that it is not just helpful but *true*." Pete doesn't want to go to any Christian gatherings, so they start studying the Bible together and listening to sermons and lectures and discussing them.
- Kerrie and two other Christian friends are moms who have young kids. They decide to start a daytime moms' group and invite non-Christian friends. For about a year, the group grows to include a similar number of Christians and nonbelievers. The conversations are general and freewheeling — covering spiritual, social, marriage, parenting, and personal issues. As time goes on, several of the nonbelievers begin to go to church with the believers and cross over into faith. After three years, the group is a Christian Bible study but still open and inclusive toward a few nonbelievers who come regularly.
- Jim and Cynthia are both artists who are involved in a citywide Christian artists' fellowship based in their local church. The fellowship typically includes a discussion of the relationship of faith to art that assumes a Christian belief, but the artists have four events a year that will be either a gallery showing or a book event in which a credible working artist talks to a general audience about how their faith relates to their art. Jim and

Cynthia are diligent in bringing non-Christian artists or art appreciators to these events.

- Greg comes to faith in Christ through a skeptics/seeker group hosted by a church. When the date for his baptism is set, he invites a number of non-Christian friends to the service and then takes them out for lunch and discusses the whole event. One friend is very moved by the experience, and Greg invites him to come back. Eventually, the friend begins coming to his small group with him.¹⁰

We can make several observations about these examples. First, it should be clear that we are not just talking about evangelism in the traditional sense here. Some of these examples show instances of encouraging and building up new believers; some point to ways of spurring Christians on to greater growth in Christ; others depict situations of helping believers address particular problems in their lives. And yet the basic form of this every-member gospel ministry is the same:

- **Organic.** It happens spontaneously, outside of the church's organized programs (even though it occasionally makes use of formal programs).
- **Relational.** It is done in the context of informal personal relationships.
- **Word deploying.** It prayerfully brings the Bible and gospel into connection with people's lives.
- **Active, not passive.** Each person assumes personal responsibility for being a producer rather than just a consumer of ministry; for example, even though Fred continues to come to the small group as he always has, his mind-set has changed.

Traditional evangelism is only one piece of this every-member gospel ministry, and it is often not the largest piece. Still, as lay ministry grows in a congregation, so, too, will the amount of evangelism.

Second, notice we are talking about lay *ministry*, not necessarily lay *leadership*. Often ministers talk about lay ministers and lay leaders as if they are the same thing. But this may betray too much attractional church thinking. By lay leaders, I mean volunteers who lead and run church programs. Being a lay leader can be time-consuming and may even make lay ministry more difficult for a season. Lay leadership usually requires some level of leadership and organizational ability, while lay ministry does

not. Lay leaders are extremely important to lay ministry — overworking lay leaders can kill lay ministry in a church — but they are not the same thing. Lay ministers are people who actively bring their Christian example and faith into the lives of their neighbors, friends, colleagues, and community.

My experience has been that when at least 20 to 25 percent of a church's people are engaged in this kind of organic, relational gospel ministry, it creates a powerful dynamism that infuses the whole church and greatly extends the church's ability to edify and evangelize. Lay ministers counsel, encourage, instruct, disciple, and witness with both Christian and non-Christian individuals. They involve themselves in the lives of others so they might come to faith or grow in grace. Then a certain percentage of the people served by these lay ministers come into the lay ministry community as well, and the church grows in quality and quantity. Because they are being equipped and supported by the church's leaders, those involved in lay ministry tend to feel a healthy sense of ownership of the church. They think of it as “our church,” not “their church” (referring to the ordained leaders and staff). They freely and generously give of their time, talent, and treasure.

This is the tide that lifts every boat in ministry. Without Christian education and counseling, without formal and informal diaconal work, without the preaching of the Word and administration of the sacraments, without support for family life, without the management and stewardship of resources, without church government and discipline, laypeople will not be built up into lay ministers. But if lay ministry is happening all through and around the church, it grows each of these other functions in quality and quantity. Where do the human resources and even the financial resources come from to do *all* of the work of the church? They come from every-member gospel ministry.

MISSIONAL EVANGELISM THROUGH MINI-DECISIONS

Notice another assumption behind the examples of lay ministry given here: many people process from unbelief to faith through “mini-decisions.”

We hold to the classic teaching about the nature of the gospel: to be a Christian is to be united with Christ by faith so that the merits of his saving

work become ours and his Spirit enters us and begins to change us into Christ's likeness. You either are a Christian or you are not — you either are united to him by faith or you are not — because being a Christian is, first of all, a “standing” with God. However, we also acknowledge that coming to this point of uniting to Christ by faith often works as a process, not only as an event. It can occur through a series of small decisions or thoughts that bring a person closer and closer to the point of saving faith. In a post-Christendom setting, more often than not, this is the case. People simply do not have the necessary background knowledge to hear a gospel address and immediately understand who God is, what sin is, who Jesus is, and what repentance and faith are in a way that enables them to make an intelligent commitment. They often have far too many objections and beliefs for the gospel to be readily plausible to them.

Therefore, most people in the West need to be welcomed into community long enough for them to hear multiple expressions of the gospel — both formal and informal — from individuals and teachers. As this happens in community, nonbelievers come to understand the character of God, sin, and grace. Many of their objections are answered through this process. Because they are “on the inside” and involved in ongoing relationships with Christians, they can imagine themselves as Christians and see how the faith fleshes out in real life.

The process often looks something like this:

1. Awareness: “I see it.” They begin to clear the ground of stereotypes and learn to distinguish the gospel from legalism or liberalism, the core from the peripheral. They make mini-decisions like these:

- “She’s religious but surprisingly open-minded.”
- “You *can* be a Christian and be intelligent!”
- “The Bible isn’t so hard to understand after all.”
- “A lot of things the Bible says really fit me.”
- “I see the difference between Christianity and just being moral.”

2. Relevance: “I need it.” They begin to see the slavery of both religion and irreligion and are shown the transforming power of how the gospel

works. Examples of mini-decisions here are as follows:

- “There must be some advantages to being a Christian.”
- “An awful lot of very normal people really like this church!”
- “It would really help if I could believe like she does.”
- “Jesus seems to be the key. I wonder who he was.”

3. Credibility: “I need it because it’s true.” This is a reversal of the modern view that states, “It’s true if I need it.” If people fail to see the reasonableness of the gospel, they will lack the endurance to persevere when their faith is challenged. Examples of mini-decisions include thoughts like these:

- “I see that the Bible is historically reliable.”
- “You really can’t use science to disprove the supernatural.”
- “There really were eyewitnesses to the resurrection.”
- “Jesus really is God.”
- “I see now why Jesus had to die — it is the only way.”

4. Trial: “I see what it would be like.” They are involved in some form of group life, in some type of service ministry, and are effectively trying Christianity on, often talking like a Christian — even defending the faith at times.

5. Commitment: “I take it.” This may be the point of genuine conversion, or sometimes a person will realize that conversion has already happened, and they just didn’t grasp it at the time. Examples of mini-decisions include these:

- “I am a sinner.”
- “I need a Savior.”
- “Though there are a lot of costs, I really must do what Jesus says.”
- “I will believe in Jesus and live for him.”

6. Reinforcement: “Now I get it.” Typically, this is the place where the penny drops and the gospel becomes even clearer and more real.

CREATING A LAY MINISTRY DYNAMIC

A spiritual dynamic cannot really be created or controlled, but just as we need air, heat, and fuel to have a fire, certain environmental factors must be present for this lay ministry dynamic to occur. At least three factors must be in place: believers with relational integrity, pastoral support, and safe venues.

BELIEVERS WITH RELATIONAL INTEGRITY

A message is contextualized if (1) it is adapted into a new language or culture so it is understandable and yet (2) it maintains its character and original meaning in its former language/culture. Here I’m proposing that Christians *themselves* must be contextualized “letters of the gospel” (see 2 Cor 3:1–13). In other words, we will have an impact for the gospel if we are *like* those around us yet profoundly different and *unlike* them at the same time, all the while remaining very visible and *engaged*.

So, first of all, Christians must be like their neighbors in the food they eat and clothes they wear, their dialect, general appearance, work life, recreational and cultural activities, and civic engagement. They participate fully in life with their neighbors. Christians should also be like their neighbors with regard to excellence. That is, Christians should be very good at what others want to be good at. They should be skillful, diligent, resourceful, and disciplined. In short, Christians in a particular community should — at first glance — look reassuringly *similar* to the other people in the neighborhood. This opens up nonbelievers to any discussion of faith, because they recognize the believers as people who live in and understand their world. It also, eventually, gives them a glimpse of what they could look like if they became believers. It means it would be good if a nonbelieving young man on Wall Street could meet Christians in the financial world, not only those who are his age but also those who are older and more accomplished, or if an older female artist could meet Christian women who are artists of her own generation as well as others who are not.

Second, Christians must be also unlike their neighbors. In key ways, the early Christians were startlingly different from their neighbors; it should be no different for us today. Christians should be marked by *integrity*. Believers must be known for being scrupulously honest, transparent, and fair. Followers of Christ should also be marked by *generosity*. If employers, they should take less personal profit so customers and employees have more pay. As citizens, they should be philanthropic and generous with their time and with the money they donate for the needy. They should consider living below their potential lifestyle level. Believers should also be known for their *hospitality*, welcoming others into their homes, especially neighbors and people with needs. They should be marked by *sympathy* and avoid being known as self-serving or even ruthless in business or personal dealings. They should be marked by an unusual willingness to *forgive* and seek reconciliation, not by a vengeful or spiteful spirit.

In addition to these character qualities, Christians should be marked by clear countercultural values and practices. Believers should practice *chastity* and live consistently in light of the biblical sexual ethic. Those outside the church know this ethic — no sex outside of marriage — and any inconsistency in this area can destroy a believer's credibility as a Christian. Today, few people apart from those with strong Christian convictions live this way. Outsiders and non-Christians in the community will also notice how you respond to *adversity*. Being calm in the face of failure and disappointment is crucial to your Christian witness. Finally, they will notice if you are seeking *equity* — if you are committed to the common good of the community. Francis Schaeffer gives an example of what these countercultural values look like:

The Bible does clearly teach the right of property, but both the Old Testament and the New Testament put a tremendous stress on the compassionate use of that property. If at each place where the employer was a Bible-believing Christian the world could see that less profit was being taken so that the workers would have appreciably more than the "going rate" of pay, the gospel would have been better proclaimed throughout the whole world than if the profits were the same as the world took and then large endowments were given to Christian schools, missions, and other projects. This is not to minimize the centrality of preaching the

*gospel to the whole world, nor to minimize missions; it is to say that the other is also away to proclaim the good news.*¹¹

In addition to being *like* others and *unlike* others, Christians should also be *engaged* with others.¹² Mission for a contextualized believer is a matter of everyday life — of developing nonsuperficial relationships with their neighbors, colleagues, and others in the city.

Here are some practical, simple ways to do this:

Engaging neighbors

- Take regular walks in your neighborhood to meet others who are out and about. Keep a regular schedule. Go to the same places at the same time for groceries, haircuts, coffee, shopping. This is one of the main ways you get to know those who live geographically near.
- Find ways to get to know others in your building or neighborhood — through a common laundry area, at resident meetings, and in numerous other ways.
- Find an avocation or hobby you can do with others in the city. For example, don't form a Christian backpacking club; join an existing one.
- Look for ways to play organized amateur sports in the city.
- Volunteer alongside other neighborhood residents at nonprofits and with other programs.
- If you have children, be involved at the school and get to know other parents.
- Participate in city events — fund-raisers, festivals, cleanups, summer shows, concerts, etc.
- Serve in your neighborhood. Visit the community board meeting. Pick up litter regularly. Get involved in neighborhood associations. Find individual neighbors (especially elderly ones) and find ways of serving them.
- Be hospitable to neighbors — when and where appropriate, invite them over for a meal or a movie, etc.

Engaging colleagues, coworkers, and friends

- Do recreational activities with them — watch sports (live or on TV at home or in a nightspot): go to a theater show, museum exhibit, art gallery exhibit, etc.
- Invite them to join a sports league with you.
- Invite them to work out with you at a gym.
- Put together a movie night.
- Go out of your way to eat with them as often as possible. Invite people over for a meal in your apartment or home or just invite them out to try a new restaurant.
- Plan trips or outings — a trip to a beach, a historical site, etc.
- If the person has a skill or interest, ask them (sincerely!) to educate you.
- Organize a discussion group on something — politics, books, etc., inviting mainly non-Christians.

Part of being engaged is to be willing to identify as a believer. Engaging relationally without doing so could be called “the blend-in approach.” Many Christians live in a social world of non-Christians but don’t think much about their friends’ spiritual needs, nor do they identify themselves as believers to their friends. Their basic drive is to be accepted, to avoid being perceived as different — but this approach fails to integrate a person’s faith with his or her relationships in the world.

The opposite can be true as well. It is certainly possible for a person to identify as a believer without engaging relationally outside the church. These are Christians who are aware of people’s lostness and may get involved in conversations about faith, but their relationships with non-Christians are largely superficial. We could call this “the Christian bubble approach.” In this case, believers fill all of their significant relationships outside of work with other Christians and their time with Christian activities. They have not sought opportunities to learn from nonbelievers, appreciate them, affirm them, and serve them — so regardless of what these Christians believe, those outside the church do not know they care about them.

Forty years ago, most of us knew gay people, but we didn't *know* we did because everybody was carefully quiet about it. As a result, it was possible to believe stereotypes about them. Today most young people know someone who is gay, and so it is harder to believe stereotypes or generalizations about them. I suspect most urban skeptics I talk to today do have Christian friends, but they don't know it, because we are more afraid these days of being publicly identified as believers. In this sense, many Christians today are like gay people were forty years ago — so it is quite natural for people to believe caricatures and stereotypes of Christians because the believers they actually know are not identifying themselves. Skeptics need more than an argument in order to believe; they need to observe intelligent, admirable fellow human beings and see that a big part of what makes them this way is their faith. Having a Christian friend you admire makes the faith far more credible.

These three factors — *like*, *unlike*, and *engaged*— make up the foundation of what I call Christian relational integrity. Christians have relational integrity when they are integrated into the relational life of the city and when their faith is integrated into all parts of their lives. Why is Christian relational integrity important for evangelism and mission? Many churches think of evangelism almost strictly in terms of information transmission. But this is a mistake. Christian Smith's book on young adult religion in the United States looks at the important minority of young adults who become much more religious during their twenties. The factors associated with such conversions are primarily significant personal relationships.¹³

Alan Kreider observes that early Christianity grew explosively — 40 percent per decade for nearly three centuries — in a very hostile environment:

The early Christians did not engage in public preaching; it was too dangerous. There are practically no evangelists or missionaries whose names we know ... The early Christians had no mission boards. They did not write treatises about evangelism ... After Nero's persecution in the mid-first century, the churches in the Roman Empire closed their worship services to visitors. Deacons stood at the churches' doors, serving as

bouncers, checking to see that no unbaptized person, no “lying informer,” could come in ...

And yet the church was growing. Officially it was a superstition. Prominent people scorned it. Neighbors discriminated against the Christians in countless petty ways. Periodically the church was subjected to pogroms ... It was hard to be a Christian ... And still the church grew. Why?

¹⁴

This striking way of laying out the early church’s social situation forces us to realize that the church must have grown because it was *attractive*. Kreider writes, “People were fascinated by it, drawn to it as to a magnet.” He goes on to make a strong historical case that Christians’ *lives* — their concern for the weak and the poor, their integrity in the face of persecution, their economic sharing, their sacrificial love even for their enemies, and the high quality of their common life together — attracted nonbelievers to the gospel. Once nonbelievers were attracted to the community by the lives of Christians, they became open to talking about the gospel truths that were the source of this kind of life.

Urban people today do not face the same kind of life-threatening dangers that they did in the Greco-Roman world — plagues, social chaos, and violence. In that environment, being in a loving community could literally mean the difference between life and death. But urban residents today still face many things that Christianity can address. They lack the hope in future progress and prosperity that past generations of secular people have had. They face a lonelier and more competitive environment than other generations have faced. The quality of our lives — marked by evident hope, love, poise, and integrity — has always been the necessary precondition for evangelism. But this has never been more necessary than it is today.¹⁵

Why is there so little relational integrity among believers? The answer is largely — though not wholly — motivational. People who are in the blend-in mode often lack courage. They are (rightly) concerned about losing influence, being persecuted in behind-the-scenes ways, or being penalized professionally. On the other hand, those who are in the bubble mode are unwilling to make the emotional, social, or even financial and physical investment in the people around them. Surprisingly, the Internet contributes to much of this. Technology now makes it possible for a person to move to

a city and remain in touch with their Christian friends and family in other places, while unintentionally making it easier to ignore the people who are physically living around us. This can contribute to our reluctance to invest emotionally in people.

But this lack of motivation is not the only reason we fail to see laypeople doing evangelistic outreach. Many are highly motivated but still feel handcuffed by a lack of skill and know-how. They find that the questions their non-Christian friends ask about the faith very quickly stump them or even shake their own faith. They feel they can't talk about the Christian faith with any kind of attractive force. This lack of skill and knowledge accentuates their lack of courage (they are afraid of being stumped) and even affects their compassion for others (they feel as though they won't be of any real help). This leads us to consider the second necessary factor for effective lay ministry.

PASTORAL SUPPORT

There is a way to pastor that promotes this every-member gospel ministry, just as there is a way to pastor that kills it. Whatever else they do, pastors and other church leaders must be aware of the importance of lay ministry and intentional about preparing people for it. They must be personally involved in the lives of lay ministers. The reasons so many Christians lack relational integrity — lack of motivation, lack of compassion, or lack of ability and knowledge — are often overcome through a strong pastoral connection with the lay ministers.

This connection does not come primarily through formal, content-heavy training sessions on “how to share your faith” (though this is vital and can be very helpful; at Redeemer, we are producing such materials to fit an urban environment). Instead, it is formed through informal teaching and support and ongoing advice from pastors and ministry leaders. Pastors must constantly remember to encourage and push laypeople to use their relationships for the ministry of the Word.¹⁶

It is important for a pastor to model how to both *talk* to people about faith issues and *pray* for them. In my earlier years at Redeemer, I did this in two ways: through the sermons I preached and in the Q&A sessions I held after

every morning service. I modeled how to pray for people through regular prayer meetings with leaders in which we prayed for our nonbelieving friends. This modeling instills a sense of courage, compassion, and responsibility in people and encourages them to reach out to their friends.

A pastor and his team must be models of Christian relational integrity for the rest of the congregation. David Stroud, a London church planter, shares how his wife, Philippa, became deeply involved in the local public school while he started a neighborhood watch program on their street. These endeavors got them immersed into the life of the city and brought them into many relationships with their neighbors.¹⁷

In addition to modeling, it is also important that pastors maintain a practical and simple vision for a relational ministry of the gospel. It should be clear that reaching out to friends and colleagues does not necessarily involve sharing a complete gospel presentation in a single encounter. Despite the fact that this was the stated goal of several evangelism training programs a generation ago, only a small number of laypeople (or even clergy!) can do this well. Reaching out to a friend is much more natural. These organic ways of reaching out must be constantly lifted up for people.

I summarize below some ways to do this, listed in order of intensity. Pastors should equip the people in their church to do all of these, pointing out that most of these behaviors require little more than some honesty and courage. Many of these are drawn from the case studies I gave earlier in this chapter.

1. One-on-one — informal

- Let others know of your Christian faith by simply mentioning church attendance or Christian beliefs in casual conversation.
- Ask questions about other people's beliefs and experiences with faith and church and simply listen appreciatively and sympathetically.
- Listen sympathetically to someone's challenges and mention that you will pray regularly for them.
- Share a difficult personal issue that you have and be sure to mention that your faith helps you by giving you strength and granting you forgiveness, etc.

- Share your spiritual narrative — a brief testimony of your Christian experience.

2. One-on-one — planned/intentional

- Offer someone a book or audio recording about Christian issues and invite them to discuss their reactions.
- Initiate a discussion about a friend's biggest problems with or objections to Christianity. Listen respectfully and give them some things to read and discuss.
- Regularly read a part of the Bible together — preferably one of the Gospels — to discuss the character of Jesus.

3. Provide an experience of Christian community

- Invite friends to situations or activities where they meet believers but where there is no direct Christian event or communication.
- Invite friends to venues where they hear the gospel communicated and discussed — onetime event, such as an open forum; fellowship group; worship service; group meeting for inquirers, such as book club, seeker group, etc.

4. Share your faith

- Share the basics of the Christian faith with your friend, laying out how to become a Christian and inviting them to make a commitment.

It is important for pastors or elders to be readily available to field questions about issues that church members encounter in discussions with their friends. When a non-Christian asks a question such as, “Why does God allow such evil and suffering?” your people need quick turnaround with help on how to respond. A pastor can also provide free or low-cost materials that Christians can share with their friends. For example, if a Christian is sharing how Christianity helped them face a problem, they could give their friend a book or an audio or video selection that conveys the truth they found helpful. Every believer should have access to half a dozen compelling pieces of content on different subjects that they can give to someone after talking about an issue. This, of course, includes the offer

to read and study the Bible together. Along the way, a pastor should try to meet regularly with lay ministers to talk about what is happening in their relationships. This has two purposes. On the one hand, it is a time to celebrate and encourage one another; on the other hand, it is a time to hold one another accountable to think about these relationships with a ministry mind-set that commits to reaching out and opening up to people.¹⁸

Perhaps most important, a pastor must work in a variety of ways to lay a theological motivational groundwork for lay evangelism using the gospel itself. This must be done in all kinds of venues — teaching, preaching, and personal pastoral support. What does this gospel groundwork look like? It means teaching people that the gospel gives you *humility*. As people come to understand the radical gospel analysis — that both “good” and “bad” people are equally lost and can only be saved by grace — it becomes impossible to be proud and condescending toward others without denying the gospel itself. Moralistic Christians do evangelism with the attitude, “I’m right; they’re wrong — and I enjoy telling people about it.” Nothing could be less attractive or more oblivious to the spirit of the message itself. The gospel, by contrast, leads us to look at non-Christians and know that they may very well be better people than we are. I can look at my Hindu neighbor and realize he may be a much better father to his children than I have ever been. The gospel gives us the foundation of a humble appreciation of others on which winsome relationships can be built.

The pastor can also show people how the gospel gives us hope for non-Christians. It is easy to look at some people and say, “They will never become Christians.” But when we grasp the gospel, we know that there is no such thing as atypical Christian. No person is more promising material for Christianity than another. Salvation is an undeserved gift. So there is hope for anyone, no matter how far from God they may seem to be. The attitude of your heart should instead be this: “Me, a Christian? Who would have ever thought that someone like me would be a Christian and a child of God? But that is what I am! It’s a wonder and a miracle.” This attitude leads us to have expectant hope as we think of anyone else.

Finally, we must explain how the gospel gives us courage for evangelism. One of the reasons we shy away from talking about Jesus and the gospel is that we are afraid. We get our sense of value from what people think of us.

We want to appear cool or sophisticated or progressive, or we want to look respectable, so we are careful to mind our own business. Sadly, when we think this way, how God regards us is not important enough to us. But the gospel keeps us from being tied to our reputation. When we know that salvation is by grace alone, we know that people come to faith only if God opens their hearts. No amount of brilliance or overpowering reason will serve to bring someone to faith. Therefore, we don't have to worry about our lack of knowledge. It is God's grace that opens hearts, not our eloquence.

If your lay ministers are ineffective in reaching out to others because they are turned off by certain kinds of people or because they lack the hope or courage to talk to others about Jesus, they may not need another book or a course on evangelism. You may just need to help them get back to the foundation — the gospel — and allow the message of God's gracious, undeserved, merciful love for sinners to work itself into their hearts in new ways. I believe the single most important way for pastors or church leaders to turn passive laypeople into courageous and gracious lay ministers is through their own evident godliness.

A pastor should be marked by humility, love, joy, and wisdom that is visible and attracts people to trust and learn from them. As a pastor, you may not be the best preacher, but if you are filled with God's love, joy, and wisdom, you won't be boring! You may not be the most skillful organizer or charismatic leader, but if your holiness is evident, people will follow you. This means, at the very least, that a dynamic, disciplined, and rich prayer life is not only important in the abstract and personal sense; it may be the most practical thing you can do for your ministry.

SAFE VENUES

It is certainly possible to have an evangelistic dynamic built strictly on relational, informal outreach by laypeople. Nevertheless, laypeople are often encouraged and instructed in their ministry if a church provides a varied set of events, gatherings, and meetings in which nonbelievers are exposed more directly to both Christians and to the gospel. Such settings must avoid two common dangers: *confusing* the newcomer (assuming a particular theological or ecclesiastical background) or *offending* the

newcomer (putting unnecessary stumbling blocks in front of them). I daresay that most well-intentioned “outreach” events I witnessed over the years have fallen into one or both of these errors. Use your ingenuity to imagine a variety of meetings and places where people without faith can, through a winsome approach, be stimulated to consider the claims of the Christian gospel. Here are some examples.¹⁹

- A one-off event, such as an open forum. At Redeemer, these have typically been artistic forums (such as “Excerpts from *Porgy and Bess*,” “Coltrane Night,” or a Bach Wedding Cantata), followed by a lecture that offers a Christian perspective on the art, with a time for questions and answers.
- A gathering in a small public venue with a brief talk and Q&A on a single topic that addresses problems people have with Christian faith. At Redeemer, we call these “Christianity Uncorked” events.
- A small group that is just beginning to form. When groups are relatively new and the dynamics are still “wet cement,” they can better embrace and draw in people who are exploring Christianity.
- A worship service that — through its preaching, music, and liturgy — is comprehensible to non-Christians.
- A group of Christians that meets for four weeks; each week, each member asks one non-Christian friend a question about their religious beliefs for the purpose of listening to (not debating) other religious beliefs and objections to Christianity.
- A group mainly for non-Christians that meets regularly. *Less intense*: a book club focused on reading fiction books by C. S. Lewis, Flannery O’Connor, J. R. R. Tolkien, G. K. Chesterton, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, etc., that get at Christian themes, or even reading books by non-Christians and talking about the faith perspectives and worldviews they represent. *More intense*: Eight-week “seeker groups” that meet to study a book. Some people may respond well to frank discussions about common “defeaters” of Christianity,²⁰ while others may prefer to explore the life of Jesus through reading one of the Gospels or using a book such as *King’s Cross*.²¹

- Onetime “salons” in which Christians bring non-Christian friends to hear an informal presentation by a Christian speaker on a topic, followed by a discussion.
- Worship “after meetings.” Examples include a Q&A session after the church service with the preacher of the day, where any questions are allowed, though usually the topic of the message is covered; an apologetics class (five to seven weeks) that makes a case for the truth of Christianity; or a seven-week class covering basic Christian beliefs and Christian living, oriented to new believers but open to attendance by seekers.
- Affinity-based outreach. Campus ministries, vocational (industry-based) ministries, and men’s or women’s gatherings can have an evangelistic/apologetics aspect in their regular meetings and may hold outreach events at neutral venues, similar to the ones described above.

Evangelism should be natural, not dictated by a set of bullet points and agenda items that we enter into a conversation hoping to cover. Friends share their hearts with each other and do what’s best for each other. Evangelism will come organically in friendship if we don’t let our pride, fears, and pessimism cause us to hide our faith and heart. We must help our people naturally talk to their friends about how they see reality. The more these gospel dynamics are present in their lives, the more they will draw in new people like a magnet (Acts 2:47) and help them find faith in the most credible, natural, and fruitful way.

In general, simply bringing nonbelievers into the Christian community at any point is safe if the whole community is very warm and accepting toward those without faith, if the community is not culturally alien, if the community is shepherded by pastors who make lay ministry a priority, and if the church is doing balanced and integrative ministry. It is to this last subject that we turn our attention in part 7.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Read through the various examples of every-member gospel ministry. Which of these situations sound similar to something

you have done personally? Which of them spark creative ideas for sharing your faith, as well as for leading others to do so? What could your team do to become more intentional in this type of gospel ministry? Can you add to the list other examples you have seen in your community?

2. What do you think of the idea that people may need to be “welcomed into community long enough for them to hear multiple expressions of the gospel — both formal and informal — from individuals and teachers” before coming to faith? What might keep a nonbeliever from being involved in your community? What are you doing to welcome nonbelievers into your community of faith?
3. This chapter presents the idea of believers having “Christian relational integrity.” This means they have an impact for the gospel on the people around them if they are *like* those around them, yet profoundly different and *unlike* them, all the while remaining very visible and *engaged*. What do you think it means to be *like*, *unlike*, and *engaged with your* community? How do you think your team members are doing in each of these areas? How would you rate your church in the area of relational integrity?
4. Which of the various ideas for providing safe venues do you currently practice in your ministry? How “safe” would an unbeliever rate the venues you provide? What single safe venue would you like to prototype?

CHAPTER 3 — EQUIPPING PEOPLE FOR MISSIONAL LIVING

1. Ryan Bolger, “Marks of a Missional Church,” http://thebolgblog.typepad.com/thebolgblog/2006/01/marks_of_a_miss.html (accessed February 17, 2012).
2. John Stott, *Motives and Methods in Evangelism* (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 1962), 14.
3. Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 243, quoting Adolph Harnack.

4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 342–46.
6. Ibid., 244.
7. Ibid., 315.
8. Ibid., 318–38.
9. Ibid., 339.
10. Many of these examples are adapted from the ones found in Colin Marshall and Tony Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2009), 54 – 56. I’ve added some new examples and contextualized the ones found in the book.
1. Francis Schaeffer, *2 Contents, 2 Realities* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1975), 31–32.
2. For several good ideas on engagement, see Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Everyday Church: Mission by Being Good Neighbours* (Nottingham, UK: Inter-Varsity, 2011), ch. 4 (“Everyday Mission”).
3. See Christian Smith, *Souls in Transition: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of Emerging Adults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 209.
4. Alan Kreider, “‘They Alone Know the Right Way to Live’: The Early Church and Evangelism,” in *Ancient Faith for the Church’s Future*, ed. Mark Husbands and Jeffrey P. Greenman (Downers Grove, Ill.; InterVarsity, 2008), 169–70.
5. Two other must-read books about the early Christians and their witness through lay ministry are Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, and Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990).
6. For excellent, easily remembered outlines to give to laypeople for informal pastoral care and evangelism, see Chester and Timmis, *Everyday Church*, ch. 3 (“Everyday Pastoral Care”) and ch. 5 (“Everyday Evangelism”).
7. See David Stroud, *Planting Churches, Changing Communities* (Milton Keynes, UK: Authentic Media, 2009), 172.
8. For practical suggestions on how to do this, see Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, ch. 9 (“Multiplying Gospel Growth through Training Coworkers”).
9. For a comprehensive treatment and list of evangelistic venues, see Michael Green, *Evangelism through the Local Church* (Nashville: Nelson, 1992). Though dated, it is the most complete guide to the subject of its title.
10. See Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God Study Guide and DVD: Conversations on Faith and Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010).

¹. See Timothy Keller, *King's Cross* (New York: Dutton, 2011).

Appendix

The following pages contain material from the original eight-part work, including: the original [introduction](#) and the three Center Church balances ([Gospel](#), [City](#), [Movement](#)). If you are interested in additional information on these balances it can be found in the larger work. These are included here as a reference for the ebook reader.

Introduction

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 churchied, 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 favorite 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.

BOOKS ON BIBLICAL CHURCHES

Mark Dever’s book *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (2nd ed.; Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2004) is one of the most practical and useful of all the “biblical principles for churches” books. Written at a similarly popular level but from a Presbyterian perspective are Edmund P. Clowney’s *Living in Christ’s Church* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1986) and Philip Graham Ryken’s *City on a Hill: Reclaiming the Biblical Pattern for the Church in the 21st Century* (Chicago: Moody, 2003). A similar kind of book, but less doctrinally oriented, is Christian A. Schwarz’s *Natural Church Development: A Guide to Eight Essential Qualities of Healthy Churches* (St. Charles, Ill.: ChurchSmart, 1996). An introduction from an Anglican perspective is John Stott’s *The Living Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2007). The best single academic (though still accessible) theology of the church is Edmund P. Clowney’s *The Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995).

BOOKS ON “HOW TO DO CHURCH”

The original generation of practical church growth books was exemplified by C. Peter Wagner's *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1984) and *Your Church Can Be Healthy* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). More recently, influential church growth books have been written by highly successful large-church pastors. Examples include Bill and Lynne Hybels's *Rediscovering Church: The Story and Vision of Willow Creek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), Rick Warren's *The Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), and Andy Stanley's *Seven Practices of Effective Ministry* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2004). Many of these second-generation church growth books share the effectiveness of one particular ministry program or practice. Take, for example, such books as Larry Osborne's *Sticky Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), which lifts up the helpfulness of sermon-based small groups, and Nelson Searcey's *Fusion: Turning First-Time Guests into Fully Engaged Members of Your Church* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 2008), which stresses new visitor follow-up and assimilation.

The third generation of practical books directly reacts to the church growth, megachurch movement. Most offer a new way to do church through the perspective of a key concept. Thom Rainer's *Simple Church: Returning to God's Process for Making Disciples* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2006) sees discipleship as the key. Tim Chester and Steve Timmis's *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2008) rethinks church in terms of community. Colin Marshall and Tony Payne's *The Trellis and the Vine: The Ministry Mind-Shift That Changes Everything* (Kingsford, Australia: Matthias Media, 2009) understands the heart of ministry to be the training of lay ministers of the Word. Robert Lewis's *The Church of Irresistible Influence: Bridge-Building Stories to Help Reach Your Community* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) and Rick Rusaw and Eric Swanson's *The Externally Focused Church* (Loveland, Colo.: Group, 2006) lift up community involvement and service as the way forward.

A sharply different set of “church growth pushback” books have appeared under the heading of “missional church.” Early examples include Eddie Gibbs’s *ChurchNext: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2000) Reggie McNeal’s *The Present Future* (2003), and Ryan Bolger’s *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005). More recent examples include Reggie McNeal’s *Missional Renaissance* (2009) and *Missional Communities* (2011), published by Jossey-Bass, and M. Scott Boren’s *Missional Small Groups: Becoming a Community that Makes a Difference in the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010). See part 6 (“Missional Community”) for much more on the missional church movement.

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 essentially “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.

Perhaps we can diagram it like this (see next page). 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.

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* (pp. 57 – 80). The second is *reflection on culture* (pp. 101 – 16), 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* (pp. 117 – 35). 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* (pp. 83 – 101). 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.

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 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.

WHAT TO DO

How the gospel is expressed in a particular church in one community at a point in time

- *Local cultural adaptation*
- *Worship style & programming*
- *Discipleship & outreach processes*
- *Church governance & management*

HOW TO SEE

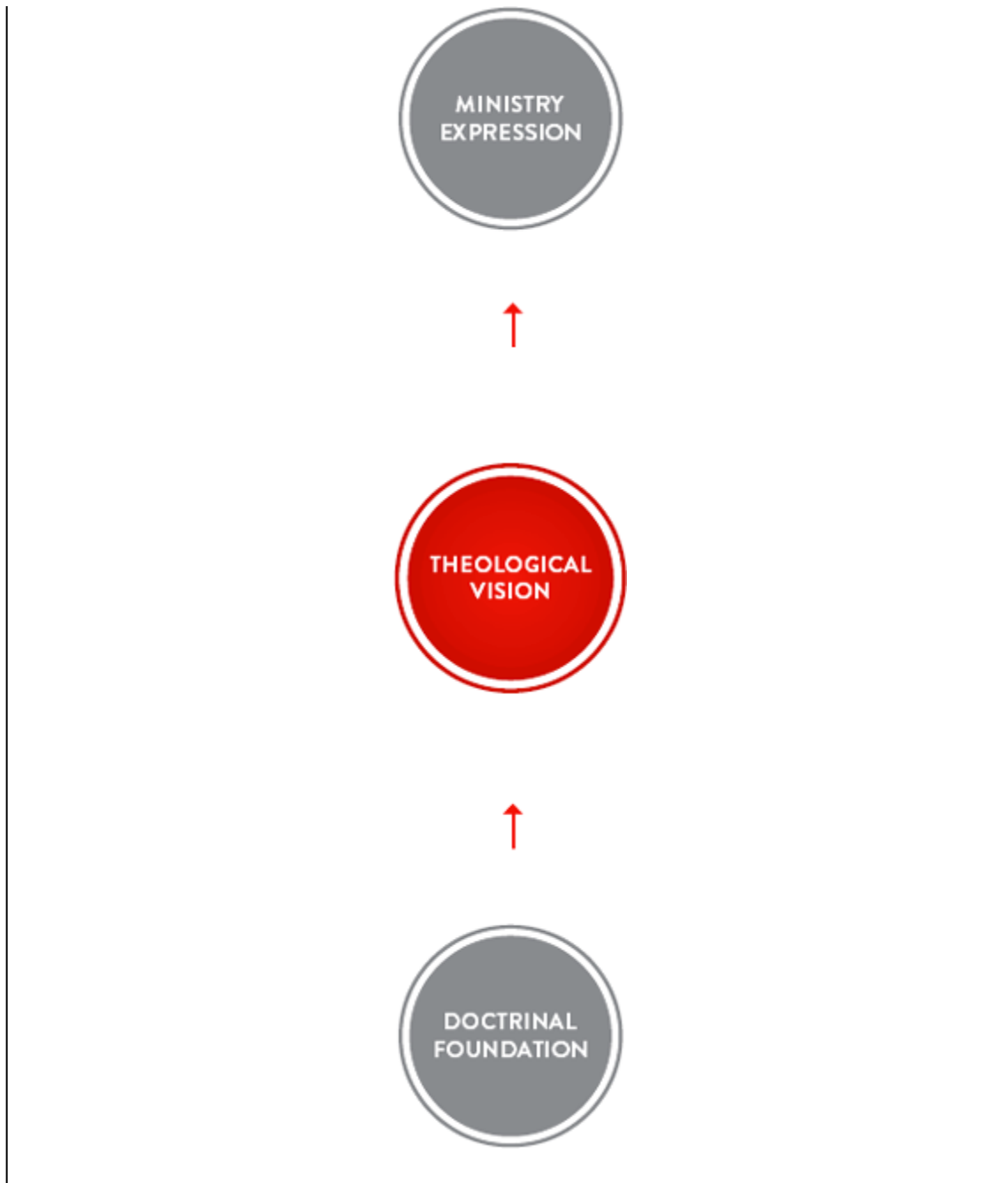
A faithful restatement of the gospel with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in a type of culture at a moment in history

- *Vision and values*
- *Ministry “DNA”*
- *Emphases, stances*
- *Philosophy of ministry*

WHAT TO BELIEVE

Timeless truths from the Bible about God, our relationship to Him, and His purposes in the world

- *Theological tradition*
- *Denominational affiliation*
- *Systematic & biblical theology*



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 overcontextualize 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.

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

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.

In the end, different metaphors, such as middleware and DNA, are useful in drawing out certain aspects of how a theological vision works.

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

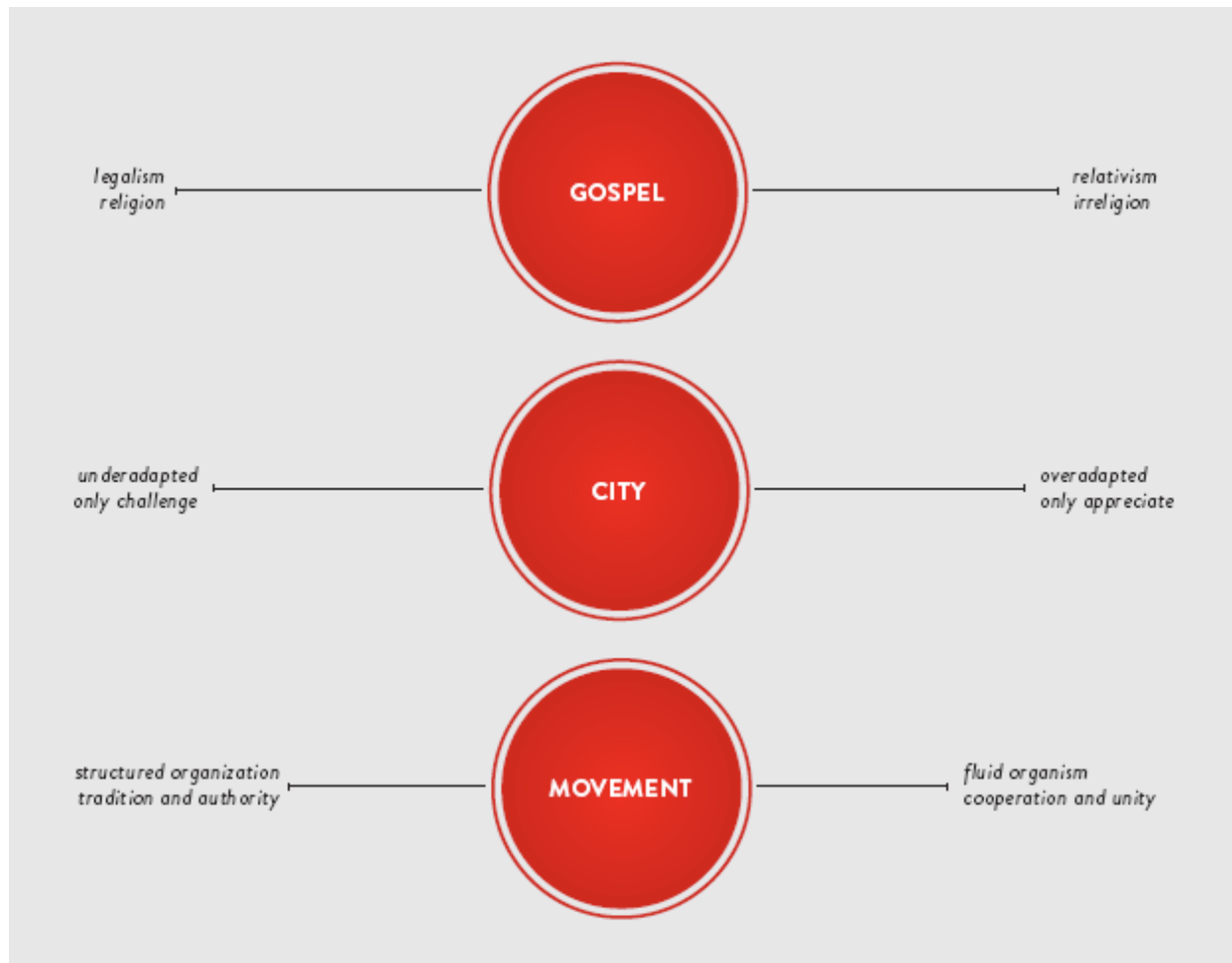
ministry operating in a major urban center, we had to spend time studying the Bible to see what it said about cities in particular — and to our surprise we found that it said a lot. Every church, whether located in a city, suburb, or rural area (and there are many permutations and combinations of these 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.¹¹

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.¹² 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 life-changing 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:¹³

Section 1: GOSPEL

Part 1: Gospel Theology. We seek to be characterized by our gospel-theological depth rather than by our doctrinal shallowness, pragmatism, non-reflectiveness, 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 mind-set of willing cooperation with other believers, not being turf conscious and suspicious but eagerly promoting a vision for the whole city.¹⁴

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.

Introduction — Center Church Theological Vision

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.: Crossway, 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).
0. 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.
1. It can be argued that the Gospel axis is not like the other two. In the other two axes, the desired position is a midpoint, a balance between extremes. However, Sinclair Ferguson (in his lectures on the Marrow Controversy) and others have argued that the gospel is not at all a balance between two opposites but an entirely different thing. In fact, it can also be argued that legalism and antinomianism are not opposites but essentially the same thing — self-salvation — opposed to the gospel. So please note that putting Gospel between these two extremes is simply a visual shorthand.
2. Astute readers will notice later in this book that I advise churches to *not* occupy an exact midpoint on the spectrum between a structured organization and a fluid organism. I suggest you occupy a position a couple of steps toward the organism end to maintain a spirit of innovation and creativity. So while this three-axis schematic does not precisely convey all we want to say about each topic, it is a good way to remember the basic themes and emphases.
3. 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.

4. 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.

Center Church Balances: Gospel Balance



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.

- Remember that the gospel is not *everything*, neither is it a *simple* thing.
- Draw on both synchronic (STM) and diachronic (RHM) views of Scripture.
- Employ several intercanonical themes in our preaching and pastoring, not just one or two.
- Incorporate the upside-down, inside-out, and forward-back aspects of the kingdom.
- Acknowledge that there are individual and corporate aspects to salvation.
- Know that the kingdom is already *and* not yet.

- Demonstrate the harmony of grace and truth.
- Promote revivalism that recognizes the formative role of the church, yet also addresses the individual heart.
- Counsel believers to have both doctrine/knowledge and experience/feeling.

Center Church Balances: City Balance



Center Church ministry is neither undercontextualized nor overcontextualized to the city and the culture. Because the city has potential for both human flourishing and human idolatry, we minister with balance, using the gospel to both appreciate and challenge the culture to be in accord with God's truth.

- Be informed and shaped by all of Scripture all of the time — the parts that are offensive to our personal and cultural sensibilities, as well as those that are more plausible and energizing to us.
- Realize that while no truth can be articulated in a culture-transcending way, the truth does transcend culture.
- Be willing to interact with different cultures in order to come to a more rounded biblical Christianity.
- Have a stance toward the city/culture that includes critical enjoyment and appropriate wariness, for it is a mix of both common grace and sin.
- Confront hearers with an epistemological challenge, a personal challenge, and a proclamation of Christ.

- Employ more than one type of appeal in gospel presentations — logical and existential, short-term and long-term.
- Minister with boldness and confidence as well as with humility and irony, for the gospel creates both in you at the same time.
- Hold to one true gospel, yet learn to creatively adapt it in culturally specific ways.
- Actively engage the city/culture, while avoiding cultural captivity in all its forms (cultural fundamentalism and withdrawal; cultural relativism and syncretism).
- Drill (affirm culture) and blast (confront culture) when you preach and teach.
- Address both “A” beliefs and doctrines and “B” beliefs and doctrines.
- Use a balance of all the atonement grammars (battlefield, marketplace, exile, temple, law court, substitution).
- See cities as a social form with the potential for both God-given purpose and self-centered rebellion against God.
- Live as both residents and foreigners in this world.
- Emphasize the goodness of secular vocation and the importance of building up the church.
- Take a view of cultural engagement that is informed by the whole of the biblical story line so that it is neither too pessimistic nor too optimistic about the possibility for cultural change and so that it affirms the presence of both common grace and pervasive sin in every culture.
- “Seek the center” by incorporating the key biblical insights of each Christ-and-culture model, where there is a greater reliance on the whole cloth of biblical themes — creation and fall, natural and special revelation, curse and common grace, the “already but not yet,” continuity and discontinuity, sin and grace.
- Realize that your preferred model for relating the church to culture is the product of external forces (theological commitments) and internal forces (temperament and spiritual gifts).

- Understand the mission of the church in both institutional and organic terms.

Center Church Balances:

Movement Balance



A Center Church is both an organism and an organization. Because the church is both a stable institution with inherited traditions and a dynamic movement of the Holy Spirit, we minister with balance, rooted in our ecclesial tradition yet working cooperatively with the body of Christ to reach our city with the gospel.

- Avoid the twin errors of trying to re-create a Christian society and withdrawing from society into the spiritual realm.
- Acknowledge the core ideas animating the “missional” church without abandoning the classic doctrines of sin and grace that create joy in the heart and an urgency for evangelism.
- Incorporate both the individual/vertical and corporate/horizontal aspects of sin into the motivation for mission, recognizing that the former is what creates space for the latter.
- Allow all the biblical metaphors for the church to inform our practice of church life.
- Acknowledge that our preference for certain worship styles is based on culture and temperament as well as on biblical principle. Ensure that

worship will be both edifying and evangelistic by centering on the gospel and conducting worship in the vernacular.

- Maintain a balance on both individual and churchly piety through ecclesial revivalism.
- Emphasize both word ministry (gospel messaging) and deed ministry (gospel neighboring), and ensure there are venues to do them both together.
- In rhetoric about acts of mercy and justice, acknowledge the role of both systemic injustice and individual responsibility and show that the gospel of grace can help address both.
- Highly value secular work and still call people to work out of a distinctive Christian worldview.
- Strive to keep the church balanced between the characteristics of a freewheeling organism and a disciplined organization.
- Honor and value the general and special offices of ministry, understanding that the Holy Spirit is at work in both.
- Find common ground to work together with non-Christians, while still offering prophetic critique of cultural idols.
- Reflect both the order and ardor of God's Spirit, balancing the need for spontaneity with the need for unity.
- Support the Spirit-equipped gifting and calling of every believer (the general office), while recognizing the special gifts and callings given to some to exercise leadership (the special office).
- Recognize that it takes all kinds of church models to reach a city, and celebrate the healthy versions of each model.

ABBREVIATIONS

BIBLE BOOKS

Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1–2 Sam	1–2 Samuel
1–2 Kgs	1–2 Kings
1–2 Chr	1–2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh	Nehemiah
Esth	Esther
Job	Job
Ps/Pss	Psalms/Psalms
Prov	Proverbs
Eccl	Ecclesiastes
Song	Song of Songs
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lam	Lamentations
Ezek	Ezekiel

Dan	Daniel
Hos	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad	Obadiah
Jonah	Jonah
Mic	Micah
Nah	Nahum
Hab	Habakkuk
Zeph	Zephaniah
Hag	Haggai
Zech	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi
Matt	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom	Romans
1–2 Cor	1–2 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians
Phil	Philippians
Col	Colossians
1–2 Thess	1–2 Thessalonians
1–2 Tim	1–2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Phlm	Philemon
Heb	Hebrews
Jas	James
1–2 Pet	1–2 Peter

1–2–3 John	1–2–3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev	Revelation

BIBLE VERSIONS

ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible

GENERAL

AD	<i>anno Domini</i> (in the year of [our] Lord)
cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
ch(s).	chapter(s)
diss.	dissertation
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by, edition
e.g.	<i>exempli gratia</i> , for example
esp.	especially
et al.	<i>et alii</i> , and others
ff.	and the following ones
ibid.	<i>ibidem</i> , in the same place
idem	that which was mentioned before, same, as in same author
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
n.	Note
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
p(p).	page(s)
repr.	reprinted
rev.	revised
trans.	translator, translated by
v(v).	verse(s)

Acknowledgments

At first glance, this seems to be a book about what I've learned during my ministry in New York City, or perhaps about what we at Redeemer have learned in our church planting efforts. The truth is, the material in this book is just as much the fruit of what many others have learned and accomplished in major global centers around the world over the past fifteen years. To a much greater degree than with any of my other books, this one was written in and with a community — a network of practitioners across the great cities of the world from whom I have learned much.

The kernel of this book derives from a set of lectures I gave in London during 2008 and 2009 to an international gathering. Even those talks had been the product of what others had taught me, but since then, this material has been rigorously critiqued by others in the trenches around the world, and so it has expanded and been revised multiple times during the past three years.

I have had many interlocutors because of the work of the staff of Redeemer City to City. They have done a remarkable thing in helping to advance gospel movements in cities by emphasizing a Center Church theological vision, *not* by simply importing specific programs from the United States and from Redeemer Presbyterian Church. Through their humility and generosity, they have helped to make a lasting impact on the cities of the world for Christ. I particularly want to thank my colleagues Terry Gyger, Al Barth, Jay Kyle, and Mark Reynolds for their leadership.

Some of the colleagues in ministry who carefully read chapters and provided a wealth of feedback included Enoch Wong, Fong Yang Wong, Darrin Patrick, Siebrand Wierda, Richard Coekin, Dan Macdonald, Andrew Jones, and Mike Wittmer. Their extremely helpful insight shaped (and probably delayed!) this book more than they know.

Above all, I want to thank Scott Kauffmann of Redeemer City to City's Content Labs for serving as the project manager who brought this book into existence but also for the enormous amount of editing he did to turn this ungainly mass of material into an orderly, readable volume. Any elegance of presentation should be attributed to him. I also thank Ryan Pazdur, John Raymond, and the team at Zondervan, as well as David McCormick and the team at McCormick and Williams — we are deeply grateful for your committed and skillful partnership. As you saw in the introduction, I am indebted to Rick Lints (and his book *The Fabric of Theology*) for his seminal thinking on theological vision. Finally, thanks to Michael Thate, David Denmark, Cindy Widmer, and John Thomas — each of you made significant contributions that enriched this book and made its publication possible.

Finally, one of the joys of writing books is to have more places to thank my wife, Kathy, for her innumerable contributions, both seen and unseen. This book, as with all the others, is indebted to her ideas and her encouragement in ministry.

Praise for *Center Church*

In a fast-changing culture that seems alien to many Christians (just as Christians seem alien to many in the culture!), it is easy for Christians to throw up their hands in despair and adopt a purely defensive mode. In this important book, Tim Keller unpacks the gospel and gently but firmly reminds us that it is nonnegotiable. At the same time, he enables us to think through how we can responsibly interact with the culture, how we can—indeed, must—appreciate good things within it, and how we can firmly and faithfully apply the gospel to it. But this is not a mechanical how-to book; rather, it is a reflective meditation on some hugely important themes in Scripture written by someone who has exercised faithful pastoral ministry in a major city for two decades.

D. A. Carson, research professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical
Divinity School

No one has listened more closely to the harmonies of city, culture, church, and Scripture than Tim Keller. In *Center Church*, he not only describes the different strains of music but also tells us how he has orchestrated the results for the sake of ministry outreach and renewal. Now it's our turn to listen, as Tim practically yet powerfully prepares us to participate in this great symphony of the gospel.

Bryan Chapell, president, Covenant Theological Seminary

Center Church is an immensely helpful resource for the next generation of church leaders. It is theologically profound, thought-provoking, and energizing, and it will make you uncomfortable in measure. Once again, Tim Keller has hit the bull's-eye!

Alistair Begg, senior pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland, Ohio

We don't need another "do ministry like my church does ministry" book. Nor do we need another book that critiques other church models. We need a book that helps us think critically and biblically as we structure our churches. *Center Church* is packed with Tim Keller's experience, humility, and wisdom. This book will help you if you are serious about seeing your city transformed by the gospel of grace.

Darrin Patrick, lead pastor, The Journey, St. Louis, Missouri

As our culture continues to move toward a post-Christian secularism, it is more vital than ever that Christians know the gospel well and know how to communicate it effectively. In *Center Church*, Tim Keller masterfully explains what the gospel is and how to relate it successfully wherever we serve. This is more than an academic analysis; it is pastoral coaching of the best sort, based on three decades of successful practice. Thanks, Tim.

Sandy Willson, senior minister, Second Presbyterian Church, Memphis,
Tennessee

Most of us observe and see the obvious. Tim observes and sees that which is unseen by others—especially when it comes to the truth of God's Word and the culture of the day. Once again, he has given us deeper insights—this time regarding the church and how she can experience her healthiest potential. How foolish to know of this book and not read it!

Randy Pope, pastor, Perimeter Church, Atlanta, Georgia

This outstanding book, like the Manhattan ministry out of which it has come, shows how Reformed theological acumen and wise pastoral intelligence may combine to achieve spiritual fruitfulness in urban contexts everywhere. Every page illuminates. Keller is a huge gift to today's church.

J. I. Packer, professor emeritus, Regent College

Center Church is not only a doctrinally rigorous and socially perceptive explanation of a sustained and remarkable work of God in Manhattan but also a hugely important, original, and timely call to mission that is appropriately contextualized for contemporary urban culture. We need to carefully learn from these principles if we are to reach our cities for Christ.

Richard Coekin, director, Co-Mission church planting network, London,
England

Cities are challenging and complex but also important and strategic. And those who are called to minister in cities need encouragement and resources that fuel hope and effectiveness. That's why I'm so glad that Tim Keller has written this book. His passion for the gospel, heart for the city, and vision of a movement of the Holy Spirit that will transform lives and bring hope and peace to our cities has compelled him to share his insights and thinking with us. What's more, the church he serves speaks to the integrity of his heart and the possibility of the reality of this vision. Be prepared. Your thinking will be sharpened, and your heart will be moved.

Dr. Crawford W. Loritts Jr., senior pastor, Fellowship Bible Church,
Roswell, Georgia

Tim Keller has given us the must-read book on gospel-shaped ministry. Robustly theological and profoundly practical, it is a top-to-bottom survey of gospel implications for the life and ministry of the church. The gap between biblical and practical theology is masterfully bridged. Having worked with Tim and Redeemer City to City, I have benefited from the content of this book and can also attest to its profound influence on ministers and churches throughout the world. This is not simply curriculum content; it is exactly the kind of life-giving, generative gospel theology our churches need. No thoughtful Christian's bookshelf should be without it.

Stephen T. Um, senior minister, Citylife Presbyterian Church, Boston,
Massachusetts

Church leaders abandon their unique calling if they merely think theologically to the exclusion of seeing the world in light of the gospel and helping their churches live in the world with gospel wisdom. No one makes this case more clearly today than Tim Keller. He resists the all-too-easy pattern of selling a simple model of what it means to be the church that fits every setting. Instead he brings to life the myriad ways churches are called to be faithful and fruitful in their own unique cultural context. Read this book if you want to learn how to ask the really important (and difficult) questions by which the gospel confronts our ecclesial identity.

Richard Lints, Andrew Mutch distinguished professor of theology, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

I'm not exaggerating when I say that *Center Church* is my favorite book Tim Keller has written thus far. Perhaps this book simply represents the distillation of Tim's wisdom—the synthesis of years of marinating in the gospel, exegeting the text of Scripture, and engaging the soul of our culture; his willingness to dialogue without diatribe; his ongoing commitment to think through the radical implications of God's grace; his great love for Jesus' bride, God's kingdom, and the history of redemption. It's all refreshingly here. What an awesome and practical read! I cannot wait to use this book with emerging leaders and churches willing to dream.

Scotty Smith, founding pastor, Christ Community Church, Franklin,
Tennessee

Many know Tim Keller the pastor, apologist, and theologian. But he is also an urban evangelist—an evangelist for the city. In *Center Church*, we find all of the unique facets of his vision and calling in one place. More than essential reading, it is a gift because Tim Keller has given his heart and life to the work of the kingdom in the city.

Mark R. Gornik, director, City Seminary of New York

In *Center Church*, one of the great missionary statesmen of our times lays out a vision of the church vigorous enough to transform entire cities through its agency of the gospel. Tim is a gifted teacher, an outstanding leader, and an exemplary disciple of Jesus. A worthy read!

Alan Hirsch, founder of Forge Missional Training Network

We live in a day of remarkable church leaders and wonderful Christian thinkers, but I'm not sure there's a more thoughtful church leader in our day than Tim Keller. *Center Church* is his call for church ministry formed by deep theological reflection and sensitive cultural exegesis executed by courageous leaders so that the city may once more flourish under the gospel.

John Ortberg, senior pastor, Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, Menlo Park,
California

Tim Keller's church in New York City serves as one of the world's best models for gospel-centered ministry that wisely, biblically, and fruitfully connects with its community. This is mainly due to Dr. Keller's deep understanding of the gospel and his exceptional gift for interpreting culture. His latest book will be immensely helpful to anyone doing ministry anywhere. *Center Church* is not a manual for replicating Keller's ministry, but something much more important: a theological vision for how the gospel of Jesus Christ relates to culture, ministry, and the Christian life.

Philip Ryken, president, Wheaton College

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Gospel Theology

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Previously Published in *Center Church*

EPub Edition © August 2013 ISBN: 978-0-310-51694-1

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Keller, Timothy J., 1950-

Center church : doing balanced, Gospel-centered ministry in your city / Timothy J. Keller.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-310-49418-8 (hardcover)

1. City missions. 2. City churches. 3. Church work. 4. Evangelistic work. I. Title.

BV2653.K45. 2012

253.09173'2 — dc23

2012012176

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Cover design: Kristin Spix Design

Cover photography: Last Refuge/Robert Harding

About

About Redeemer City to City

For the first time in the history of the world, more than 50% of the world's population lives in cities. Five million people a month are joining them.

Global cities are the greatest missional challenge of our generation. To bring the gospel to the nations, we need hundreds of new churches in the great cities of the world.

To learn more about Tim Keller's ministry to reach global cities, go to redeemercitytocity.com



About the Author

TIMOTHY KELLER is the founder and senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, and the New York Times bestselling author of *The Reason for God* and *The Prodigal God*. He has also mentored young urban church planters and pastors in New York and other cities through Redeemer City to City, which has helped launch over 200 churches in 35 global cities to date.

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Today many pastors are struggling to adapt to a post-Christian culture without abandoning orthodox theology. How do we communicate the concepts of grace and substitutionary atonement in our globalized culture and context?

In *Center Church*, Timothy Keller offers challenging insights and provocative questions based on over twenty years of ministry in New York City. This book outlines a theological vision for ministry - applying classic doctrines to our time and place - organized around three core commitments:

- Gospel-centered: The gospel of grace in Jesus Christ changes everything, from our hearts to our community to the world. It completely reshapes the content, tone and strategy of all that we do.
- City-centered: With a positive approach toward our culture, we learn to affirm that cities are wonderful, strategic and underserved places for gospel ministry.
- Movement-centered: Instead of building our own tribe, we seek the prosperity and peace of our community as we are led by the Holy Spirit.

All eight sections of *Center Church* are available as individual eBooks!

The perfect size for your ministry team, the eight sections of *Center Church* are available as individual, downloadable eBooks. Now you can easily take your whole team through the section of *Center Church* that is most critical for you ministry. The eight eBooks are:

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