Reflections on Timothy Keller’s *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*

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Introduction

Pastors and church leaders usually recognize the need to evaluate their ministry. But with that recognition, they must determine how to evaluate themselves. In his introduction, Tim Keller offers three potential goals: success, faithfulness, and fruitfulness. Those who emphasize success often focus on externals—conversions/members, giving, etc. Others have reacted against the focus on external success by emphasizing faithfulness. Pastors and ministries should only be evaluated by their commitment to doctrine, character, faithfulness in preaching and discipleship—whether or not there is any visible success. Keller believes a better goal is fruitfulness—utilizing imagery from both Jesus and Paul. This agricultural analogy includes three factors: 1) faithfulness and skill of the gardener—i.e., pastor, 2) soil conditions—i.e., people, and 3) weather conditions—i.e., God’s sovereign work. Thus, church leaders should strive for effectiveness while recognizing there are other factors outside of their control.

Since pastors are to be fruitful, what should they do to work for fruit? The book is an attempt to answer that question. Keller argues that his book is a missing step between two common books written about churches—those focusing on biblical teaching for the church’s doctrine and function and those focusing on techniques and programs for churches. Though both books are valuable, they are not enough to help pastors in different locations to work for fruitfulness. The former are important, but churches that get the foundation right can thrive in some areas and not others. The latter are really only applicable to similar size churches in similar locations. What Keller offers is a step between doctrine and practice—that he calls a “theological vision.” This theological vision rises from deep reflection on both the gospel and your cultural setting that enables you to relate your doctrinal beliefs to your community. The book is an effort to lay out Keller’s theological vision for churches in post-modernity/late modernity, especially churches in urban centers.

Keller offers a set of questions to help pastors develop their theological vision, and works through these questions in the book:

- 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?

Keller calls his theological vision a “center church” for four reasons: 1) The gospel is at its center. 2) The center is the place of balance. 3) This theological vision is shaped by and for urban and cultural centers. 4) The theological vision is at the center of ministry.

The book is divided into three sections that match up with a center church’s three basic commitments: gospel, city/culture, and movement. Keller’s approach is to maintain a balance in all three of these areas.

Gospel

“The gospel is neither religion [legalism/moralism] nor irreligion [license/relativism], 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.”

Summary Points

• Remember that the gospel is not everything, neither is it a simple thing.
• Draw on both synchronic (systematic-theological method) and diachronic (redemptive-historical method) 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.

Reflections

Keller’s discussion of the gospel includes several valuable aspects. He maintains the emphasis on individual justification as central to any proper understanding of the gospel while not limiting the gospel to that vital truth. Instead, he notes the life transforming effects of the gospel in every area of a believer’s life. His discussion on the two equal but opposite enemies of the gospel provides a good model for pastor’s to embrace. Preaching must continually warn against the error of looking to your own works for salvation and the error of thinking you need

1 These points are summary statements at the end of each section in the book.
no salvation—and the truths of the gospel confront both errors. His emphasis on preaching to both Christians and non-Christians at the same time flows from the proper understanding of the gospel. Since Scripture continually highlights the themes of sin, grace, Christ, resurrection, regeneration, etc., we can apply the sermon to unbelievers and believers alike. We can ground believers in the deep truths of the gospel while also showing unbelievers how the gospel confronts their way of life.

The section on revival is mostly helpful as well. Keller rightly distinguishes true spiritual revival from the revivalism of today and encourages pastors to seek true gospel renewal that includes the conversion of unbelievers and a heightened awareness for believers of the truths of the gospel and their implications for their lives. However, Keller’s Presbyterian heritage is noticeable in this section, with the practice of infant baptism leading to unregenerate members of a church necessitating gospel renewal. Thus, he mentions Jeremiah 4:4 as an OT model of revival preaching that calls for heart circumcision as necessary for those who have the outward sign of circumcision. He then applies this to the New Testament as a continued necessity for many who are “members of God’s covenant people” (1400). This fails to note one of the areas of discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments—that God’s people all have circumcised hearts. Of course, our inability to determine whether or not an individual is regenerate means gospel renewal is still important in our churches.

City

“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.”

Summary Points

- Be informed and shaped by all of Scripture all of the time—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.

2The parenthetical references are to Kindle location numbers.
• 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.

Reflections

Keller’s discussion of contextualization is measured and insightful. Though I think he has allowed culture to influence him too strongly in some areas (e.g., Keller is a well-known proponent of theistic evolution), that influence seems to be an issue of application and not necessarily of underlying philosophy. He offers valuable suggestions in beginning with truths that the culture will find attractive in Christianity and showing the unbeliever’s inconsistency in denying other related truths. His illustration is memorable: when you bind logs together you can then transport stones on top of them across a river, but if you try to place the logs on the stones it will miserably fail (3333). Thus, if you begin with the beliefs a culture has in common with the Scriptures, you can then move to the beliefs that are offensive to a culture. However, the preacher must be careful to maintain the authority of the Scripture in the discussion rather than the authority of culture—the common belief is true because it is in Scripture, not because the culture believes it.

In beginning to discuss believers’ relation to the culture, Keller emphasizes their role as resident aliens. He notes the parallels between the New Testament believer and the Jews in Babylon. Just as Jeremiah urged the Jews to seek the welfare of the pagan city in which they found themselves residing, though it was not their permanent home, Christians are not to shrink
back into self-contained communities but are to be engaged in the world while not losing their distinctive identity as citizens of heaven (Jer 29:7). Yet Keller provides two differences between the Jews in Babylon and Christians today: 1) Though the Jews mission was centripetal and their increase was primarily through growing families, the church’s mission is centrifugal and increases through evangelism. 2) Though the Jews still followed the Mosaic code, Christians can follow even more aspects of the culture around them—allowing for more interaction in the culture but also a greater danger of compromise (4057).

The portion of the book I found most intriguing was the discussion of cultural engagement. Keller continually emphasizes the necessity of the church adjusting its theological vision in a post-Christian culture. Since the church and culture are no longer linked together, Christians have responded to culture in various ways. Keller groups these responses into four models. The first is the Transformationist model, which includes neo-Kuyperians/neo-Calvinists, the Religious Right, and Theonomists (on a progressive scale). This model views culture as fallen but able to be changed. Thus, Christians are to be active in pursuing changes to bring about a Christian culture. Proponents focus largely on the importance of a distinctive Christian worldview. The second model is the Relevance model, which includes seeker sensitive churches, the merging church, liberal/mainline denominations, and liberation theology (on a progressive scale). This model sees culture as basically good and able to be adopted by the church to influence society. Thus, Christians should embrace the culture. The third model is the Counterculturalist model, which includes neo-Anabaptists, New Monastics, and the Amish (on a progressive scale). This model views culture as mostly evil—an enemy to be avoided and opposed. The role of the church is to serve as a clear counter-culture. The final model is the Two Kingdom model, which includes Lutheran and Reformed Two Kingdom proponents (on a progressive scale). This model sees the culture as part of God’s creation upheld by common grace. Thus, Christians are to participate in the culture along with unbelievers by following God’s natural laws. They do not offer any distinctly Christian culture in the world at large—only in the church. Keller points out strengths and weaknesses of each approach, ultimately urging Christian leaders to strive towards the center of all four models. This center notes both the goodness and the fallenness of culture, and seeks an active influence in culture while recognizing the progress will only be limited until Christ returns. However, Keller does admit that Christians will most likely fall primarily into one model—based on their giftedness—and must seek to incorporate the better elements of other models to follow a center church vision.

Though Keller’s overview and critique is thought-provoking, it also seems to be simplistic and over-generalized. For example, he states that the Two Kingdom proponents “basic idea centers on the dignity of secular vocation and the importance of doing this work in a way marked by an excellence that all can see” (6865, emphasis original). This allows Keller to utilize that strength as the unique contribution of the Two Kingdom model. The problem is that this is not the center of the Two Kingdom model. At least as important if not more so is the distinctiveness of the church within the world—thus, the two kingdoms. This is perhaps an example where a desire to find a balanced, centered position is unhelpful. Not all of these positions are of equal value, so seeking the center of the positions is not the most helpful way forward.

3 Traditional Dispensationalists may be included in either the Counterculturalist model or the Two Kingdom model. Progressive Dispensationalists may also be included in the Transformationist model.
One other concern in the issue of culture is Keller’s insistence that the church must influence culture. Keller argues against the idea that Christians can change culture simply through evangelism and discipleship and that Christians are not called to change the world by arguing that culture plays a significant role in “preparing people for evangelism” (5197). If Christians do not influence the culture than people will not be able to understand the gospel—it will be alien to them. Though this argument sounds plausible, it does not fit with the spread of the gospel by the early church. The Greco-Roman world was certainly not a Christian culture, yet Christians were able to explain the gospel and see conversions. Thus, a Christian-influenced culture is not necessary for evangelism. Further, though Keller often points to Scripture to back his claims, there is virtually no reference to Scripture in his insistence on Christians influencing culture. That may be explained by the lack of Scriptural references to Christians influencing culture. Neither the book of Acts nor the Epistles place any emphasis on controlling the culture-making institutions to make the culture more Christian. The primary emphasis on a Christian’s engagement with culture was in living a life that matched the gospel and showed its beauty (e.g., Tit 2:1-10). Christians should be involved in culture-making institutions as salt and light—not to transform the culture but to restrain evil and to be a witness to others in those arenas.

Movement

“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.”

Summary Points

- Avoid the twin errors of trying to re-create a Christian society and withdrawing from a 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.

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4It is probably true that culture will not be changed simply by increasing the number of Christians. The larger issue is whether or not Christians should be focused on changing the culture.
• 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.

**Reflections**
Throughout this section Keller maintains an emphasis on every member ministry. But the ministry of most members is not pushed towards the church’s physical location or even only within the church. Rather, they are to be active in reaching out to unbelievers, counseling believers, welcoming new members, etc as they go about their lives. He mentions a helpful distinction between the church organized and the church organic. The church organized is the church operating corporately under the direction of its leaders and fulfilling the Great Commission. The church organic is every member dispersed and living out the truth of the gospel in their lives. This will best happen as believers are like their neighbors in culturally appropriate ways, unlike their neighbors in gospel-centered ways, and engaged with their neighbors by intentionally building redemptive relationships.

One of the greatest values of this section is the discussion on work and faith. Though churches do not train people vocationally, they must train them to know how to be Christians in their vocations. This includes at least four ways the gospel shapes the way a Christian works. 1) It changes our motivation for work. 2) It changes our conception of work. 3) It provides a high ethic for Christians in the workplace. 4) It gives us the basis for reconceiving the very way in which our kind of work is done.

One of the major weaknesses of this section is Keller’s emphasis on unity and cooperation for gospel movements in cities. Though he does note the necessity of holding doctrinal beliefs and challenging ministry partners on key theological issues, he advises a general willingness to cooperate with a variety of churches and ministries—even arguing for the value of helping in church plants that do not share your same ecclesiastical distinctives (e.g., Presbyterian church helping to plant a Pentecostal church). Though ecclesiastical distinctives are not

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5However, he also encourages allowing unbelievers who have begun to attend to participate in ministry as part of the journey of faith.
primary—gospel issues are—they still carry significant weight. Further, the emphasis on unity and cooperation stems largely from the desire to see city-wide mercy ministries as a testimony for the gospel, which requires city-wide cooperation among churches to support them. If those city-wide ministries are not a necessary work of the church, there is less incentive for cooperating with those who do not share your doctrinal values.

Conclusion

*Center Church* is a valuable book that will provide guidance and stimulate the kind of thinking that is vital for healthy churches. Though you may disagree with some of the applications and conclusions, you should wrestle with the questions. The importance of ministering the gospel in a variety of contexts demands this kind of careful consideration.