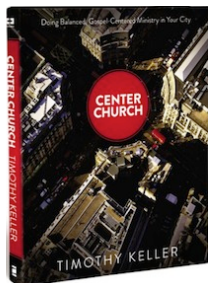


Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City

by Timothy Keller,

Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012. 400 pages, \$20 on Amazon



In *Center Church* Timothy Keller seeks to show what exactly it looks like for a local church to be an engaged, evangelical ministry center in the middle of a large heterogeneous metropolis. His book is the answer to the question so many are asking: How has Redeemer Presbyterian been so successful in New York—one of the most secular and materialistic cities in history? Should we all adopt the ‘Redeemer Model’ and replicate it in our town?

Keller, however, advises that the key to success is not simply copying Redeemer Church, but ‘doing the hard work’ of going back and creating a ‘theological vision’ for our ministry. That 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’ (20). In fact, Keller’s whole book is an attempt to help pastors do just that. This then, is what Keller means by ‘Center Church’: a balanced approach to doing church that is never cookie-cutter but (1) has the gospel at its center; (2) is balanced in all ways, especially in theological emphases and in ‘word and deed’; (3) is *for* the urban and cultural centers of the world (which most Christians have abandoned); and, (4) has its own clear theological vision at the center of its ministry.

Perhaps this vision is what is most stunning about Keller—the breadth of his vision—one which not only has room for the rest of us, but actively and genuinely seeks to partner with us, no matter what our denomination. Keller states,

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 know 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 know 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 like Redeemer in certain ineffable ways. (20, *italics his*)

The ‘ineffable’ things Keller hopes we’ll agree to are simply the main points of a center church, which are elucidated in the remainder of his book. These Keller boils down to three major axes: *gospel, city and movement*. Each of which requires *balance* (or centrism). Thus, to be a center church, we need a *gospel* that is

faithful to the Word, neither swaying into legalism/religion (as many pietistic and fundamentalist groups have) nor into relativism/irreligion (as in liberal churches). We need a position toward the culture of the *city* that is neither under-adapted (which only challenges and confronts) nor over-adapted (which only appreciates). And, we need an understanding of *movement* that allows for structured organization (including tradition and authority in the church) but does not snuff out the dynamics of fluid organism, cooperation and unity (23). Keller concludes his vision for Center Church with this challenge, ‘The more that ministry comes ‘from the center’ of all the axes, the more dynamism and fruitfulness it will have’ (24). I’d love to be involved in a church like that!

When I stop and consider what Keller is saying in this book it is honestly mind-boggling. Gone are the divisive, hard-nosed doctrinal statements some Calvinists are known for (Keller says that such ‘Z-doctrines’ (307) can be held, but should not be normally espoused in Sunday services). Missing are calls for pastors to ‘imitate me as I imitate Christ’. (Instead Keller seeks to give a book to everyone that will preclude them needing to come and see him in action, but give the keys to success to anyone who will read it.) Unmentioned are doctrinal polemics on Baptist, Pentecostal, Arminian or other theologies—instead Keller presents a very helpful discourse on how to engage in ‘gospel polemics’ in a winsome way (see pages 372-373) and shocks us by saying that Redeemer even financially supports church planting by other denominations (369). What affords Keller such grace towards so many others that could be considered inferior in theology or practice? Again, it’s his vision: ‘In New York city, we pray for and work toward a time when 10 percent of the center city population is involved in a gospel-centered church’ (377). To attain such a vision Keller readily acknowledges, ‘it takes all kinds of churches to reach a city’ (380). To me, such a vision can only come from the Spirit of Jesus himself who said, ‘Lift up your eyes and look at the fields!’ (John 4:35) and ‘whoever is not against you is for you’ (Luke 9:50). Only when we truly look at the Word *and* at the fields will we see the need to work together.

Tim Keller has written a magisterial book primarily for pastors serving in major metropolitan areas around the world. For me personally, as a missionary serving in a smaller city in Indonesia, I found his vision for church planting affirming and his articulation of the gospel to be refreshing. And I am captivated by his vision. Nevertheless, there were areas of concern that make the book of only limited use for those ministering in Muslim contexts. I’ll end this review by noting these things and giving my perspective on them.

First, Keller almost invariably refers to D.A. Carson when he needs a scholarly quote. As a Trinity Evangelical Divinity School graduate and former student of Carson, I am also a fan of Carson. But I found it almost embarrassing how often he quoted Carson—not only on issues of NT scholarship, but even on issues relating to outreach and culture. I think Keller would better exhibit his

wide-evangelicalism by using quotes from a broader spectrum of reputable scholars. More importantly, I'd also suggest he refer more frequently to the *Bible* to back his points rather than always feeling the need to quote another (human) scholar.

Second, Keller seems to be intent on promoting 'Christianity', whereas I believe we are to promote Christ. I understand the difficulty of avoiding the category 'Christian' all together, especially in an American context. But I also cringe when an author seems to muddy the waters between the Person of Christ and the religion(s) of Christianity. There were several times where this thought struck me forcefully in the pages of this book; I cite just one example here. Seeking to illustrate what 'every-member gospel ministry' could look like, Keller gives several examples. In one case, a Christian states the following to his unbelieving friend, 'If Christianity is going to be of any help, it will only be if you come to believe that it is not just helpful but *true*' (280). I found myself asking, 'which form of Christianity' is he talking about? And, would it not be better to substitute the Person of Christ in this sentence rather than seeking to defend a faith that is practiced by over 1 billion people alive today in nearly every expression imaginable? Now, undoubtedly, Keller is using the term 'Christianity' in the very best sense. However, to many, many unbelievers around the world they are simply not interested in 'Christianity': they see only the abuses of the Church, our sordid history, Western decadence, or perhaps their own unhappy childhood. I find it's preferable to simply talk about the Person of Christ and his teachings instead of trying to clean up the public image of 2,000 years of Christian history. And this is the case around the world, but especially with Muslims.

My third concern—and most significant—is how Keller seems to always assume that the preaching ministry of the church will be central. But is that necessarily so? What if the Pastor is not able to always 'get it right' and preach 'excellent' sermons as Keller apparently does? Over and over again Keller tells pastors that we 'must speak' in certain ways that—strive as I may—I find myself unable to consistently do. In one poignant example he states that we should 'avoid sentimentality and hype' as our communication 'should be marked by gentle humor and honest realism ... yet seasoned with a ground note of joy and hope that never diminishes...' (273). Oh that I were that way! And every pastor! But what if we're not? Are we doomed to failure in a consumer-oriented society that demands excellence? Or perhaps, in this area, Keller has somehow slightly moved the balance from the Word to the *Preacher* of the Word. As I see it, Scripture puts much more emphasis on the message (1 Cor 1:18) and the Gospel (Rom 1:16), the proclamation of the Word (Rom 10:17) and the actual power of the Word itself (Heb 4:16) than on the speaker. In fact, Jesus and Paul specifically warn us about not becoming the center of attention lest we become

proud and people's attention moves off of Christ and onto men (see Matt 23:10-12, 15; 1 Cor 2:1-5).

While I am not accusing Keller of spiritual pride, I am fully aware of this danger in my own heart – and of the cult of the personality around the world. I think that Keller has the wind of the Spirit in his sails in so many ways in this book, but in this area I wish I could show him how God is using Discovery Bible Studies around the world. Churches that have substituted Discovery Groups as the main way for members to get into the Word have found a way that is much more interactive, interesting and life-changing than even the best Reformed preaching. And these Discovery model churches are exploding around the world, numbering several hundred thousand today. I am not suggesting there is no role for well-trained and eloquent preachers. But that perhaps the preacher-centered Reformation model may have run its course and the Spirit is leading His Body to more reproducible models that allow for ‘the rest of us’ to also be effective in multiplying churches the way Keller longs for.

With these caveats in mind, I heartily recommend *Center Church* to pastors everywhere, especially those in major urban centers. And I'd recommend it for missionaries working in urban environments who want a serious read on doing balanced, gospel-centered ministry paving the way for effective multi-organizational collaboration. Even those who are unwilling or unable to apply Keller's understanding of the centrality of preaching to their contexts will learn much about the nature of the church, a theology of ‘city’ and the importance of church planting. Oh, how we need more ‘Center Churches’ around the world, and leaders who ask: ‘What's it going to take to reach the city/region/people God has given me?’ May Center Church be greatly used of God around the world.

Reviewed by Steven Steinhaus

Steven (pseudonym) is a Pioneers field worker who has been serving with his family for twenty years among Muslims in Southeast Asia. He also wrote the article *Reforming Baptism*, above, in this issue of SEEDBED.