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Center Church

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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*

Interior design: *Kristin Spix Design/Ben Fetterley/Matthew Van Zomeren*

Printed in the United States of America

12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 /DCI/ 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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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
P s/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)

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, post-modern 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

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

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

The “secret” of Redeemer’s fruitfulness was not so much the particular ministry expression but the way in which we arrived at the expressions we used at Redeemer.

sensibilities of both Christians and non-Christians in our midst, and about the emotional and intellectual landscape of the center city. It was the character of that analysis and decision-making process rather than its specific products that was critical to the fruitfulness of our ministry in a global city center. We wanted to be shaped by what Jonathan Edwards called “the rules of the gospel.”² We did not simply choose music or sermon illustrations to please our own tastes and make us happy, any more than Christ lived to please himself.

HARDWARE, MIDDLEWARE, SOFTWARE

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

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.

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

“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.” — Richard Lints

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.

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

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.

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

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

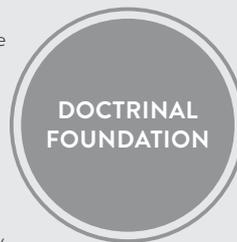
- *Vision and values*
- *Ministry "DNA"*
- *Emphases, stances*
- *Philosophy of ministry*



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*



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

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

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.

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 slid-

ing 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*.

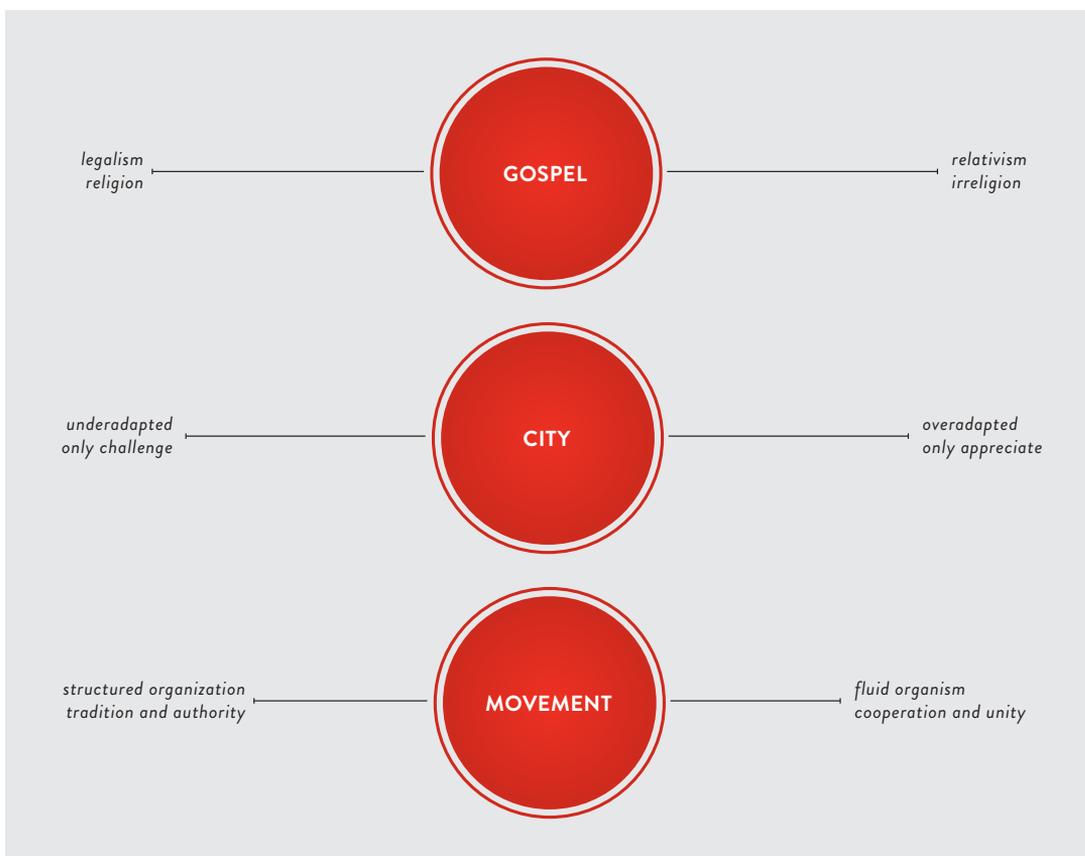
Movement. The last area of theological vision has to do with your church’s *relationships* — with its community, with its recent and deeper past, and with other churches and ministries. Richard Lints points out that one of the elements of a theological vision has to do with our understanding of tradition. 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 mindset 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 in-

fluencing 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 (pages 13–25)

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=sermontopic&SourceID=gpts&keyworddesc=The+Marrow+Controversy&keyword=The+Marrow+Controversy (accessed December 30, 2011).
10. For example, virtually all of the popular church growth books assume that churches have no distinctive ecclesiastical traditions. The volumes treat Reformed, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and Lutheran churches as if they are all alike. But there is no theological or exegetical argument offered for this. It is simply assumed that historical tradition means little or nothing.
11. 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.
12. 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.
13. 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.
14. Those who are familiar with Redeemer will certainly wonder why preaching doesn’t have its own section in the book. The answer is that it embodies all of the elements of theological vision. You will find, for example, that suggestions on preaching appear in more than half of the eight elements: how to preach for renewal, how to contextualize in your preaching, how to preach in a way that engages culture, and so on.

GOSPEL



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

GOSPEL

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

Gospel-centered ministry is more theologically driven than program driven. To pursue it, we must spend time reflecting on the essence, the truths, and the very patterns of the gospel itself. It is an unfortunate development within the history of thought in general and the history of the church in particular that has insisted on driving a wedge between theory and practice. The two belong together in dialogical relationship. Theology here is understood to be *fides quaerens intellectum*, the ministry of Christian understanding — an understanding that aims for the church's fitting participation within the drama of God's redemption.*

The first section of this book addresses several current discussions and conflicts pertaining to the nature of the gospel itself. In part 1 (**Gospel Theology**), we look at what the gospel *is* and *is not*. In part 2 (**Gospel Renewal**), we reflect on the history and patterns of revival — how individual and corporate gospel renewal occurs — and what happens as a result.

* See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

THE GOSPEL IS NOT EVERYTHING

What do we mean by “the gospel”? Answering this question is a bit more complex than we often assume. Not everything the Bible teaches can be considered “the gospel” (although it can be argued that all biblical doctrine is necessary background for understanding the gospel). The gospel is a *message* about how we have been rescued from peril. The very word *gospel* has as its background a news report about some life-altering event that has already happened.¹

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

The gospel is not primarily a way of life. It is not something we do, but something that has been done for us and something that we must respond to. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament — the Septuagint — the word *euangelizō* (proclaim good news) occurs twenty-three times. As we see in Psalm 40:9 (ESV) — “I have told the glad news of [your] deliverance in the great congregation” — the term is generally used to declare the news of something that has happened to rescue and deliver people from peril. In the New Testament, the word group *euangelion* (good news), *euangelizō* (proclaim good news), and *euangelistēs* (one who proclaims good news) occurs at least 133 times. D. A. Carson draws this conclusion from a thorough study of gospel words:

Because the gospel is news, good news . . . it is to be announced; that is what one does with news. The essential heraldic element in preaching is bound up with the fact that the core message is not a code of ethics to be debated, still less a list of aphorisms to be admired and pondered, and certainly not a systematic theology to be outlined and schematized. Though it properly grounds ethics, aphorisms, and systematics, it is none of these three: it is news, good news, and therefore must be publicly announced.²

2. The gospel is good news announcing that we have been rescued or saved. And what are we rescued *from*? What peril are we saved from? A look

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

In perhaps the most thoroughgoing exposition of the gospel in the Bible, Paul identifies God’s wrath as the great problem of the human condition (Rom 1:18 – 32). Here we see that the wrath of God has many ramifications. The background text is Genesis 3:17 – 19, in which God’s curse lies on the entire created order because of human sin. Because we are alienated from God, we are *psychologically* alienated within ourselves — we experience shame and fear (Gen 3:10). Because we are alienated from God, we are also *socially* alienated from one another (v. 7 describes how Adam and Eve must put on clothing, and v. 16 speaks of alienation between the genders; also notice the blame shifting in their dialogue with God in vv. 11 – 13). Because we are alienated from God, we are also *physically* alienated from nature itself. We now experience sorrow, painful toil, physical degeneration, and death (vv. 16 – 19). In fact, the ground itself is “cursed” (v. 17; see Rom 8:18 – 25).

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

thing that will save us — is to have our relationship with God put right again.

3. The gospel is news about what has been done by Jesus Christ to put right our relationship with God. Becoming a Christian is about a change of status. First John 3:14 (emphasis added) states that “we *have passed* from death to life,” not we *are passing* from death to life.³ You are either in Christ or you are not; you are either pardoned and accepted or you are not; you either have eternal life or you don’t. This is why Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones often used a diagnostic question to determine a person’s spiritual understanding and condition. He would ask, “Are you now ready to say that you are a Christian?” He recounts that over the years, whenever he would ask the question, people would often hesitate and then say, “I do not feel that I am good enough.” To that, he gives this response:

At once I know that . . . they are still thinking in terms of themselves; their idea still is that they have to make themselves good enough to be a Christian . . . It sounds very modest but it is the lie of the devil, it is a denial of the faith . . . you will never be good enough; nobody has ever been good enough. The essence of the Christian salvation is to say that He is good enough and that I am in Him!⁴

Lloyd-Jones’s point is that becoming a Christian is a change in our relationship with God. Jesus’ work, when it is believed and rested in, instantly changes our standing before God. We are “in him.”

Ever since reading J. I. Packer’s famous essay introducing John Owen’s *Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, I have liked “God saves sinners” as a good summary of gospel:

God saves sinners. God — the Triune Jehovah, Father, Son and Spirit; three Persons working together in sovereign wisdom, power and love to achieve the salvation of a chosen people, the Father electing, the Son fulfilling the Father’s will by redeeming, the Spirit executing the purpose of Father and Son by renewing. Saves — does everything, first to last, that is involved in bringing man from death in sin to life in glory: plans, achieves and communicates redemption, calls and keeps, justifies, sanctifies, glorifies. Sinners — men as God finds them, guilty, vile, helpless, powerless, unable to lift a finger to do God’s will or better their spiritual lot.⁵

THE GOSPEL IS NOT THE RESULTS OF THE GOSPEL

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

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

We must not, then, give the impression that the gospel is simply a divine rehabilitation program for the world, but rather that it is an accomplished substitutionary work. We must not depict the gospel as primarily *joining* something (Christ’s kingdom pro-

gram) but rather as *receiving* something (Christ's finished work). If we make this error, the gospel becomes another kind of a salvation by works instead of a salvation by faith. As J. I. Packer writes:

*The gospel does bring us solutions to these problems [of suffering and injustice], but it does so by first solving... the deepest of all human problems, the problem of man's relation with his Maker; and unless we make it plain that the solution of these former problems depends on the settling of this latter one, we are misrepresenting the message and becoming false witnesses of God.*⁶

A related question has to do with whether the gospel is spread by the doing of justice. Not only does the Bible say over and over that the gospel is spread by preaching, but common sense tells us that loving deeds, as important as they are as an accompaniment of preaching, cannot by themselves bring people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Francis Schaeffer argued rightly that Christians' relationships with

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

each other constitute the criterion the world uses to judge whether their message is truthful — so Christian community is the “final apologetic.”⁷ Notice again, however, the relationship between faith and works. Jesus said that a loving community is necessary for the world to know that God sent him (John 17:23; cf. 13:35). Sharing our goods with each other and with the needy is a powerful sign to nonbelievers (see the relationship between witness and sharing in Acts 4:31–37 and Acts 6). But loving deeds — even though they embody the truths of the gospel and cannot be separated from preaching the gospel — should not be conflated with it.

The gospel, then, is preeminently a report about the work of Christ on our behalf — that is why and how the gospel is salvation by grace. The gospel is news because it is about a salvation accomplished for us. It is news that creates a life of love, but the life of love is not itself the gospel.⁸

THE GOSPEL HAS TWO EQUAL AND OPPOSITE ENEMIES

The ancient church father Tertullian is reputed to have said, “Just as Jesus was crucified between two thieves, so the gospel is ever crucified between these two errors.”⁹ What are these errors to which Tertullian was referring? I often call them *religion* and *irreligion*; the theological terms are *legalism* and *antinomianism*. Another way to describe them could be *moralism* and *relativism* (or *pragmatism*).

These two errors constantly seek to corrupt the message and steal away from us the power of the gospel. Legalism says that we have to live a holy, good life in order to be saved. Antinomianism says that because we are saved, we don't have to live a holy, good life.

This is the location of the “tip of the spear” of the gospel. A very clear and sharp distinction between legalism, antinomianism, and the gospel is often crucial for the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit to work. If our gospel message even slightly resembles “you must believe and live right to be saved” or “God loves and accepts everyone just as they are,” we will find our communication is not doing the identity-changing, heart-shaping transformative work described in the next part of this book. If we just preach general doctrine and ethics from Scripture, we are not preaching the gospel. The gospel is the good news that God has accomplished our salvation for us through Christ in order to bring us into a right relationship with him and eventually to destroy all the results of sin in the world.

Still, it can be rightly argued that in order to understand all this — who God is, why we need salvation, what he has done to save us — we must have knowledge of the basic teachings of the entire Bible. J. Gresham Machen, for example, speaks of the biblical doctrines of God and of man to be the “presuppositions of the gospel.”¹⁰ This means that an understanding of the Trinity, of Christ's incarnation, of original sin and sin in general — are all necessary. If we don't understand, for example, that Jesus was not just a good man but the second person of the Trinity, or if we don't understand what the “wrath of God” means, it is impossible to understand what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Not only that, but the New

Testament constantly explains the work of Christ in Old Testament terms — in the language of priesthood, sacrifice, and covenant.

In other words, we must *not* just preach the Bible in general; we must preach the gospel. Yet unless those listening to the message understand the Bible in general, they won't grasp the gospel. The more we understand the whole corpus of biblical doctrine, the more we will understand the gospel itself — and the more we understand the gospel, the more we will come to see that this is, in the end, what the Bible is really about. Biblical knowledge is necessary for the gospel *and* distinct from the gospel, yet it so often stands in when the gospel is not actually present that people have come to mistake its identity.

THE GOSPEL HAS CHAPTERS

So, the gospel is good news — it is not something we do but something that has been done for us. Simple enough. But when we ask questions like “Good news about what?” or “Why is it good news?” the richness and complexity of the gospel begin to emerge.

USE WORDS IF NECESSARY

The popular saying “Preach the gospel; use words if necessary” is helpful but also misleading. If the gospel were primarily about what we must do to be saved, it could be communicated as well by actions (to be imitated) as by words. But if the gospel is primarily about what God has done to save us, and how we can receive it through faith, it can *only* be expressed through words. Faith cannot come without hearing. This is why we read in Galatians 2:5 that heresy endangers the truth of the gospel, and why Philippians 1:16 declares that a person’s mind must be persuaded of the truth of the gospel. Ephesians 1:13 also asserts that the gospel is the word of truth. Ephesians 6:19 and Colossians 1:23 teach that we advance the gospel through verbal communication, particularly preaching.

There are two basic ways to answer the question “What is the gospel?” One is to offer the biblical good news of how you can get right with God. This is to understand the question to mean, “What must I do to be saved?” The second is to offer the biblical good news of what God will fully accomplish in history through the salvation of Jesus. This is to understand the question as “What hope is there for the world?”

If we conceive the question in the first, more individualistic way, we explain how a sinful human being can be reconciled to a holy God and how his or her life can be changed as a result. It is a message about *individuals*. The answer can be outlined: Who God is, what sin is, who Christ is and what he did, and what faith is. These are basically propositions. If we conceive of the question in the second way, to ask all that God is going to accomplish in history, we explain where the world came from, what went wrong with it, and what must happen for it to be mended. This is a message about the *world*. The answer can be outlined: creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. These are chapters in a plotline, a story.

As we will see in the next chapter, there is no single way to present the biblical gospel. Yet I urge you to try to be as thoughtful as possible in your gospel presentations. The danger in answering only the first question (“What must I do to be saved?”) without the second (“What hope is there for the world?”) is that, standing alone, the first can play into the Western idea that religion exists to provide spiritual goods that meet individual spiritual needs for freedom from guilt and bondage. It does not speak much about the goodness of the original creation or of God’s concern for the material world, and so this conception may set up the listener to see Christianity as sheer escape from the world. But the danger in conceiving the gospel too strictly as a story line of the renewal of the world is even greater. It tells listeners about God’s program to save the world, but it does not tell them how to actually get right with God and become part of that program. In fact, I’ll say that without the first message, the second message is not the gospel. J. I. Packer writes these words:

In recent years, great strides in biblical theology and contemporary canonical exegesis have brought new precision to our grasp of the Bible's overall story of how God's plan to bless Israel, and through Israel the world, came to its climax in and through Christ. But I do not see how it can be denied that each New Testament book, whatever other job it may be doing, has in view, one way or another, Luther's primary question: how may a weak, perverse, and guilty sinner find a gracious God? Nor can it be denied that real Christianity only really starts when that discovery is made. And to the extent that modern developments, by filling our horizon with the great metanarrative, distract us from pursuing Luther's question in personal terms, they hinder as well as help in our appreciation of the gospel.¹¹

Still, the Bible's grand narrative of cosmic redemption is critical background to help an individual get right with God. One way to proceed is to interleave the two answers to the "What is the gospel?" question so that gospel truths are laid into a story with chapters rather than just presented as a set of propositions. The narrative approach poses the questions, and the propositional approach supplies the answers.

How would we relate the gospel to someone in this way? What follows is a "conversational pathway" for presenting the gospel to someone as the chapters in a story. In the Bible, the term *gospel* is the declaration of what Jesus Christ has done to save us. In light of the biblical usage, then, we should observe that chapters 1 (God and Creation), 2 (Fall and Sin), and 4 (Faith) are not, strictly speaking, "the gospel." They are prologue and epilogue. Simon Gathercole argues that both Paul and the Gospel writers considered the good news to have three basic elements: the identity

of Jesus as Son of God and Messiah, the death of Jesus for sin and justification, and the establishment of the reign of God and the new creation.¹² The gospel, then, is packed into chapter 3, with its three headings — incarnation, substitution, and restoration. Chapter 1 on God and chapter 2 on sin constitute absolutely critical background information for understanding the meaning of the person and work of Jesus, and chapter 4 helps us understand how we must respond to Jesus' salvation. Nevertheless, it is reasonable and natural to refer to the entire set of four chapters as "the gospel."

WHERE DID WE COME FROM?

Answer: God. There is one God. He is infinite in power, goodness, and holiness and yet also personal and loving, a God who speaks to us in the Bible. The world is not an accident, but the creation of the one God (Genesis 1). God created all things, but *why* did he do that? Why did he create the world and us? The answer is what makes the Christian understanding of God profound and unique. While there is only one God, within God's being there are three persons — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — who are all equally God and who have loved, adored, served, and enjoyed one another from all eternity. If God were unipersonal, then he would have not known love until he created other beings. In that case, love and community would not have been essential to his character; it would have emerged later. But God is triune, and therefore love, friendship, and community are intrinsic to him and at the heart of all reality. So a triune God created us (John 1:1–4), but he would not have created us to get the joy of mutual love and

CHAPTERS	GOSPEL NARRATIVE	GOSPEL TRUTHS
Chapter 1	Where did we come from?	From God: the One and the relational
Chapter 2	Why did things go so wrong?	Because of sin: bondage and condemnation
Chapter 3	What will put things right?	Christ: incarnation, substitution, restoration
Chapter 4	How can I be put right?	Through faith: grace and trust

service, because he already had that. Rather, he created us to share in his love and service. As we know from John 17:20 – 24, the persons of the Trinity love and serve one another — they are “other-oriented.”¹³ And thus God created us to live in the same way. In order to share the joy and love that God knew within himself, he created a good world that he cares for, a world full of human beings who were called to worship, know, and serve him, not themselves.¹⁴

WHY DID THINGS GO SO WRONG?

Answer: Sin. God created us to adore and serve him and to love others. By living this way, we would have been completely happy and enjoyed a perfect world. But instead, the whole human race turned away from God, rebelling against his authority. Instead of living for God and our neighbors, we live lives of self-centeredness. Because our relationship with God has been broken, all other relationships — with other human beings, with our very selves, and with the created world — are also ruptured. The result is spiritual, psychological, social, and physical decay and breakdown. “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world”¹⁵ — the world now lies under the power of sin.

Sin reaps two terrible consequences. One consequence is spiritual bondage (Rom 6:15 – 18). We may believe in God or we may not believe, but either way, we never make him our greatest hope, good, or love. We try to maintain control of our lives by living for other things — for money, career, family, fame, romance, sex, power, comfort, social and political causes, or something else. But the result is always a loss of control, a form of slavery. Everyone has to live for something, and if that something is not God, then we are driven by that thing we live for — by overwork to achieve it, by inordinate fear if it is threatened, deep anger if it is being blocked, and inconsolable despair if it is lost. So the novelist David Foster Wallace, not long before his suicide, spoke these words to the 2005 graduating class at Kenyon College:

Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship. And the compelling reason for maybe choosing some sort of god or spiritual-type thing

to worship . . . is that pretty much anything else you worship will eat you alive. If you worship money and things, if they are where you tap real meaning in life, then you will never have enough, never feel you have enough . . . Worship your body and beauty and sexual allure and you will always feel ugly. And when time and age start showing, you will die a million deaths before they finally grieve you . . . Worship power, you will end up feeling weak and afraid, and you will need ever more power over others to numb you to your own fear. Worship your intellect, being seen as smart, you will end up feeling stupid, a fraud, always on the verge of being found out. But the insidious thing about these forms of worship is . . . they're unconscious. They are default settings.¹⁶

The second basic consequence of sin is condemnation (Rom 6:23). We are not just suffering because of sin; we are *guilty* because of sin. Often we say, “Well, I’m not very religious, but I’m a good person — and that is what is most important.” But is it? Imagine a woman — a poor widow — with an only son. She teaches him how she wants him to live — to always tell the truth, to work hard, and to help the poor. She makes very little money, but with her meager savings she is able to put him through college. Imagine that when he graduates, he hardly ever speaks to her again. He occasionally sends a Christmas card, but he doesn’t visit her; he won’t answer her phone calls or letters; he doesn’t speak to her. But he lives just like she taught him — honestly, industriously, and charitably. Would we say this was acceptable? Of course not! Wouldn’t we say that by living a “good life” but neglecting a relationship with the one to whom he owed everything he was doing something condemnable? In the same way, if God created us and we owe him everything and we do not live for him but we “live a good life,” it is not enough. We all owe a debt that must be paid.

WHAT WILL PUT THINGS RIGHT?

Answer: Christ. First, Jesus Christ puts things right through his *incarnation*. C. S. Lewis wrote that if there is a God, we certainly don’t relate to him as people on the first floor of a building relate to people on the second floor. We relate to him the way Hamlet relates to Shakespeare. We (characters) might

be able to know quite a lot about the playwright, but only to the degree that the author chooses to put information about himself in the play.¹⁷

In the Christian view, however, we believe that God did even more than simply give us information. Many fans of Dorothy Sayers's detective stories and mystery novels point out that Sayers was one of the first women to attend Oxford University. The main character in her stories — Lord Peter Wimsey — is an aristocratic sleuth and a single man. At one point in the novels, though, a new character appears, Harriet Vane. She is described as one of the first women who graduated from Oxford — and as a writer of mystery novels. Eventually she and Peter fall in love and marry. Who was she? Many believe Sayers looked into the world she had created, fell in love with her lonely hero, and wrote herself into the story to save him. Very touching! But that is not nearly as moving or amazing as the reality of the incarnation (John 1:14). God, as it were, looked into the world he had made and saw our lostness and had pity on his people. And so he wrote *himself* into human history as its main character (John 3:16). The second person in the Trinity, the Son of God, came into the world as a man, Jesus Christ.

The second way Jesus puts things right is through *substitution*. Because of the guilt and condemnation on us, a just God can't simply shrug off our sins. Being sorry is not enough. We would never allow an earthly judge to let a wrongdoer off, just because he was contrite — how much less should we expect a perfect heavenly Judge to do so? And even when we forgive personal wrongs against us, we cannot simply forgive without cost. If someone harms us and takes money or happiness or reputation from us, we can either make them pay us back or forgive them — which means *we* absorb the cost ourselves without remuneration. Jesus Christ lived a perfect life — the only human being to ever do so (Heb 4:15). At the end of his life, he deserved blessing and acceptance; at the end of our lives, because every one of us lives in sin, we deserve rejection and condemnation (Rom 3:9–10). Yet when the time had fully come, Jesus received in our place, on the cross, the rejection and condemnation we deserve (1 Pet 3:18), so that, when we believe in him, we can receive the blessing and acceptance he deserves (2 Cor 5:21).

There is no more moving thought than that of someone giving his life to save another. In Charles Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities*, two men — Charles Darnay and Sydney Carton — both love the same woman, Lucie Manette, but Lucie chooses to marry Charles. Later, during the French Revolution, Charles is thrown in prison and awaits execution on the guillotine. Sydney visits Charles in prison, drugs him, and has him carried out. When a young seamstress (also on death row) realizes that Sydney is taking Charles's place, she is amazed and asks him to hold her hand for strength. She is deeply moved by his substitutionary sacrifice — and it wasn't even for her! When we realize that Jesus did the very same thing for us, it changes everything — the way we regard God, ourselves, and the world.

The third way Jesus will put things right is through the eventual *restoration* of all that has gone wrong with the world. The first time Jesus came from heaven to earth, he came in weakness to suffer for our sins. But the second time he comes, he will judge the world, putting a final end to all evil, suffering, decay, and death (Rom 8:19–21; 2 Pet 3:13). This means that Christ's salvation does not merely save our souls so we can escape the pain of the curse on the physical world. Rather, the final goal is the renewal and restoration of the material world, and the redemption of both our souls *and* our bodies. Vinoth Ramachandra notes how unique this view is among the religions of the world:

So our salvation lies not in an escape from this world but in the transformation of this world... You will not find hope for the world in any religious systems or philosophies of humankind. The biblical vision is unique. That is why when some say that there is salvation in other faiths I ask them, "What salvation are you talking about?" No faith holds out a promise of eternal salvation for the world the way the cross and resurrection of Jesus do.¹⁸

HOW CAN I BE PUT RIGHT?

Answer: Faith. Jesus died for our sins and rose again from the grave. By faith in him, our sins can be forgiven and we can be assured of living forever with God and one day being raised from the dead like

Christ. So what does it mean to believe, to have faith? First, it means to grasp what salvation “by faith” means. Believing in Christ does not mean that we are forgiven for our past, get a new start on life, and must simply try harder to live better than we did in the past. If this is your mind-set, you are still putting your faith in yourself. You are your own Savior. You are looking to your moral efforts and abilities to make yourself right with God. But this will never work. No one lives a perfect life. Even your best deeds are tainted by selfish and impure motives.

The gospel is that when we believe in Christ, there is now “no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:1). Putting our faith in Christ is not about trying harder; it means *transferring our trust* away from ourselves and resting in him. It means asking, “Father, accept me not because of what I have done or ever will do but because of what Jesus has done in my place.” When we do that, we are adopted into God’s family and given the right to his eternal, fatherly love (John 1:12 – 13).

The second thing to keep in mind is that it is not the quality of the faith itself that saves us; it is what Jesus has done for us. It is easy to assume that being “saved by faith” means that God will now love us *because* of the depth of our repentance and faith. But that is to once again subtly make ourselves our own Savior rather than Jesus. It is not the amount of our faith but the object of our faith that saves us. Imagine two people boarding an airplane. One person has almost no faith in the plane or the crew and is filled with fears and doubts. The other has great confidence in the plane and the crew. They both enter the plane, fly to a destination, and get off the plane safely. One person had a hundred times more faith in the plane than the other did, but they were equally safe. It wasn’t the amount of their faith but the object of their faith (the plane and crew) that kept them from suffering harm and arriving safely at their destination. Saving faith isn’t a level of psychological certainty; it is an act of the will in which we rest in Jesus. We give ourselves wholly to him because he gave himself wholly for us (Mark 8:34; Rev 3:20).

THE RIGHT RELATIONSHIP OF THE GOSPEL TO ALL OF MINISTRY

There is always a danger that church leaders and ministers will conceive of the gospel as merely the minimum standard of doctrinal content for being a Christian believer. As a result, many preachers and leaders are energized by thoughts of teaching more advanced doctrine, or of deeper forms of spirituality, or of intentional community and the sacraments, or of “deeper discipleship,” or of psychological healing, or of social justice and cultural engagement. One of the reasons is the natural emergence of specialization as a church grows and ages. People naturally want to go deeper into various topics and ministry disciplines. But this tendency can cause us to lose sight of the whole. Though we may have an area or a ministry that we tend to focus on, the gospel is what brings unity to all that we do. Every form of ministry is empowered by the gospel, based on the gospel, and is a result of the gospel.

Because the gospel is endlessly rich, it can handle the burden of being the one “main thing” of a church.

Perhaps an illustration here will help. Imagine you’re in an orchestra and you begin to play, but the sound is horrific because the instruments are out of tune. The problem can’t be fixed by simply tuning them to each other. It won’t help for each person to get in tune to the person next to her because each person will be tuning to something different. No, they will all need to be tuned properly to one source of pitch. Often we go about trying to tune ourselves to the sound of everything else in our lives. We often hear this described as “getting balance.” But the questions that need to be asked are these: “Balanced to what?” “Tuned to what?” The gospel does not begin by tuning us in relation to our particular problems and surroundings; it first re-tunes us to God.¹⁹

If an element of ministry is not recognized as a

result of the gospel, it may sometimes be mistaken for the gospel and eventually supplant the gospel in the church's preaching and teaching. Counseling, spiritual direction, doing justice, engaging culture, doctrinal instruction, and even evangelism itself may become the main thing instead of the gospel. In such cases, the gospel as outlined above is no longer understood as the fountainhead, the central dynamic, from which all other things proceed. It is no longer the center of the preaching, the thinking, or the life of the church; some other good thing has replaced it. As a consequence, conversions will begin to dwindle in number because the gospel is not preached with a kind of convicting sharpness that lays bare the secrets of the heart (1 Cor 14:24 – 25) and gives believers *and* nonbelievers a sense of God's reality, even against their wills.

Because the gospel is endlessly rich, it can handle the burden of being the one "main thing" of a church. First Peter 1:12 and its context indicate that the angels never tire of looking into and exploring the wonders of the gospel. It can be preached from innumerable stories, themes, and principles from all over the Bible. But when the preaching of the

gospel is either confused with or separated from the other endeavors of the church, preaching becomes mere exhortation (to get with the church's program or a biblical standard of ethics) or informational instruction (to inculcate the church's values and beliefs). When the proper connection between the gospel and any aspect of ministry is severed, *both* are shortchanged.

The gospel is "heraldic proclamation" before it is anything else.²⁰ It is news that creates a life of love, but the life of love is not itself the gospel. The gospel is *not* everything that we believe, do, or say. The gospel must primarily be understood as good news, and the news is not as much about what we must do as about what has been done. The gospel is preeminently a report about the work of Christ on our behalf — salvation accomplished for us. That's how it is a gospel of grace. Yet, as we will see in the next chapter, the fact that the gospel is news does not mean it is a *simple* message. There is no such thing as a "one size fits all" understanding of the gospel.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. This chapter looks at several truths that are not the gospel. In what sense are each of these not the gospel?

- everything the Bible teaches
- a way of life; something we do
- joining Christ's kingdom program; a divine rehabilitation plan for the world

If the gospel is not everything, what is the gospel?

2. Keller writes, "The gospel is not about something we do but about what has been done for us, and yet the gospel results in a whole new way of life. This grace and the good deeds that

result must be both distinguished and connected." How can an individual or ministry go about distinguishing between "the gospel" and "the results of the gospel"?

3. The section titled "The Gospel Has Chapters" shows how to present the gospel to someone as chapters in a larger story. What other "conversational pathways" have you found to be fruitful in relating the gospel to non-Christians? To Christians?

4. What happens when the gospel is proclaimed without its results, or when its results are pursued without proclamation?

CHAPTER 1 – THE GOSPEL IS NOT EVERYTHING (pages 29–37)

1. Mark 1:1; Luke 2:10; 1 Corinthians 1:16–17; 15:1–11.
2. D. A. Carson, “What Is the Gospel? — Revisited,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper*, ed. Sam Storms and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010), 158.
3. The verb translated “passed” in 1 John 3:14 is *metabainō*, which means to “cross over.” In John 5:24, Jesus states, “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has *crossed over* [*metabainō*] from death to life.” A parallel passage is Colossians 1:13, where it is said that Christ-followers have been transferred from the dominion of darkness into the kingdom of the Son.
4. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Spiritual Depression: Its Causes and Cure* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 34.
5. J. I. Packer, “Introductory Essay to John Owen’s *Death of Death in the Death of Christ*,” www.all-of-grace.org/pub/others/deathofdeath.html (accessed January 4, 2012).
6. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1973), 171.
7. Francis Schaeffer, *The Mark of the Christian* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1977) 25. Cf. Timothy George and John Woodbridge, *The Mark of Jesus: Loving in a Way the World Can See* (Chicago: Moody, 2005).
8. See Carson, “What Is the Gospel? — Revisited,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name*, 158.
9. Having heard and read this in the words of other preachers, I have never been able to track down an actual place in Tertullian’s writings where he says it. I think it may be apocryphal, but the principle is right.
10. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*, new ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 99.
11. J. I. Packer, *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2007), 26–27.
12. Simon Gathercole, “The Gospel of Paul and the Gospel of the Kingdom,” in *God’s Power to Save*, ed. Chris Green (Leicester, UK: Inter-Varsity, 2006), 138–54.
13. D. A. Carson (*The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2000], 39, 43) writes, “What we have, then, is a picture of God whose love, even in eternity past, even before the creation of anything, is other-oriented. This cannot be said (for instance) of Allah. Yet because the God of the Bible is one, this plurality-in-unity does not destroy his entirely appropriate self-focus as God . . . There has *always* been an other-orientation to the love of God . . . We are the friends of God by virtue of the intra-Trinitarian love of God that so worked out in the fullness of time that the plan of redemption, conceived in the mind of God in eternity past, has exploded into our space-time history at exactly the right moment.”
14. See “The Dance of Creation,” in Tim Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 225–26; “The Dance,” in Tim Keller, *King’s Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus* (New York: Dutton, 2011), 3–13.
15. From the poem “The Second Coming” (1920) by William Butler Yeats.
16. Emily Bobrow, “David Foster Wallace, in His Own Words” (taken from his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College), <http://moreintelligentlife.com/story/david-foster-wallace-in-his-own-words> (accessed January 4, 2012).
17. See C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 167–76.
18. Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Scandal of Jesus* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001), 24.
19. Thanks to Michael Thate for this illustration.
20. Carson, “What Is the Gospel? — Revisited,” in *For the Fame of God’s Name*, 158.