



CITY VISION

CENTER CHURCH *Part Four*

TIMOTHY KELLER

City Vision

Center Church, Part 4

TIMOTHY KELLER



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

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

Table of Contents

Title Page

Dedication

A Note to the Reader

1. The Tension of the City

2. Redemption and the City

3. Church Planting as a Movement Dynamic

4. The City and the Gospel Ecosystem

Appendix

Introduction: Center Church Theological Vision

Center Church Balances

Abbreviations

Acknowledgments

Praise for *Center Church*

Copyright

About

A Note to the Reader

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

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

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

Part 1: Gospel Theology

Part 2: Gospel Renewal

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

Part 3: Gospel Contextualization

Part 4: City Vision

Part 5: Cultural Engagement

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

Part 6: Missional Community

Part 7: Integrative Ministry

Part 8: Movement Dynamics

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

CHAPTER 1

THE TENSION OF THE CITY

Many Christians today, especially in the United States, are indifferent or even hostile toward cities. Some think of them as a negative force that undermines belief and morality, while others see them as inconsequential to Christian mission and living. It may also be true that some young Christians are adopting a romanticized view of the city.¹ But the attitude of the biblical authors is quite different. The biblical view of cities is neither hostile nor romantic. Because the city is humanity intensified — a magnifying glass that brings out the very best and worst of human nature — it has a dual nature.²

This is why the Bible depicts cities as places of perversion and violence and also as places of refuge and peace. Genesis 4 and 11 depict city builders as those in the line of Cain (the first murderer). Genesis also depicts the evil of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Yet Psalm 107 speaks of a group of wandering people “finding no way to a city where they could settle... and their lives ebbed away. Then they cried out to the Lord... He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle. Let them give thanks to the Lord” (vv. 4–8). The psalmist depicts life for people without a city as a bad thing. The assumption behind this psalm is that the city is a place where human life thrives — it is a positive social form. The depiction of the city in the Bible is therefore finely nuanced. It highlights how the capacities of this positive social form can be realized for God’s glory yet also demonstrates how it can be a vehicle for enhancing human rebellion against God. And as we will see in chapter 12, the city plays a pivotal role in the arc of redemptive history.

In this chapter I want to look at this tension between the city’s God-exalting promise and its man-exalting shadow. We will find this dual nature played out in the pages of Scripture and mirrored in our contemporary world, for in most ways our cities are still today as they have always been.

THE CITY DEFINED

But first we must ask: What do we mean by a city? Today, a city is usually defined in terms of population size. Large population centers are called “cities,” smaller ones “towns,” and the smallest “villages.” We must be careful, however, not to impose our current cultural understanding of city onto the biblical term. The most common Hebrew word for city, ‘*ir*, meant any human settlement surrounded by some fortification or wall.³ Most ancient cities numbered only about one thousand to three thousand in population but the residents were tightly packed within the city wall.⁴ Therefore, according to the Bible, the essence of a city was not the population’s size but its density. A city is a social form in which people physically live in *close proximity* to one another.

Psalm 122:3 refers to this density: “Jerusalem, built as a city should be, closely compact.”⁵ In a fortified city, the people lived close to one another in small residences on narrow streets. City life was street life — physical human presence at all times and in all places. In fact, most ancient cities were estimated to be five to ten acres in size, containing an average of 240 residents per acre.⁶ By comparison, the island of Manhattan in present-day New York City houses only 105 residents per acre — with high-rises! After Nehemiah rebuilt Jerusalem’s city wall, there were far too many vacant homes for Jerusalem to flourish as a city (Neh 7:4). In other words, the city wasn’t densely populated enough to function as a city should. So 10 percent of the nation was commanded to move into the city to fill it (Neh 11:1). When cities first arose, they created a distinct kind of human life within their walled, protected space. Out of this dense proximity flowed three signal features that mark urban human life.

WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?

The contrasts drawn here between city, suburb, and town are generalized, and in many places in the world the distinctions are blurred. For example, the New York City borough of Queens consists of many formerly independent towns and suburbs that became engulfed by urban growth and so share some characteristics of both suburbs (e.g., low density, reliance on the automobile, detached single-family housing) and cities (e.g., diversity, mixed land use). This means that places like the strongly Asian-populated town of Flushing, New York (technically part of New York City) are more than simple neighborhoods and need a city vision of their own. The outer rings of many of the older European cities are much like this — with distinctly “urban suburbs.”

SAFETY AND STABILITY

First, because early cities had walls, a city meant greater *safety* and therefore *stability*. Cities’ primary importance lay in their resistance to hostile forces, whether opposing armies, marauders, blood feud avengers, or wild animals. The walled safety of a city allowed for a far more stable life than was possible outside the city, and this led to the growth of human civilization. *Civilized* literally means “citified.” When the Israelites were conquering Canaan, they were amazed at the strength of its fortified cities (Deut 1:28; 9:1; Josh 14:12), and as they settled the land, they built cities for themselves (Num 32:16 – 42). It should not surprise us that in the Bible the city is used as a metaphor for confidence (Prov 21:22; cf. Deut 28:52). Proverbs 25:28 tells us that a man without self-control is like a city without a wall. Cities were places where life was not dangerously out of control.

Because of this stability, systems of law and order were able to develop first in urban settings. Early cities had gates where the elders sat and decided cases according to the rule of law. Outside the gates, disputes were settled by the sword, which led to blood feuds, destruction, and social disorder. The wall and the gate made it both necessary and possible to develop systems of jurisprudence so matters could be settled fairly, without violence. God commanded the Israelites to build “cities of refuge” to which

individuals who killed someone accidentally could flee and plead their case (Num 35:6).

The idea of the city as a place of safety and stability does not immediately strike modern readers as intuitive. We may accept that cities were safe places in earlier times, but today we think of cities as places of high crime. The latest studies indicate that this concept — that higher crime is inevitable in cities — is a mistake.⁷ And we must broaden our definition of “the city as safe space.” This concept continues to drive the growth and success of many cities in chaotic parts of the world. Even modern-day cities such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and Gaborone (in Botswana) have thrived because they have established themselves as bastions of the rule of law in disorderly parts of the world, thereby attracting a disproportionate amount of economic investment and human talent.

But another way in which most cities thrive is that they have become places of refuge to which minority groups and individuals can flee from powerful interests. In Bible times, accused criminals could flee blood avengers, seek refuge in the city, and have their case heard by the city elders (Num 35; Deut 19; Josh 20). Even today, economically pressed or politically oppressed people who need to move out of their homeland to achieve a better life usually emigrate to cities. It is in these places of density and proximity that immigrant groups can create “mini-cities” with their own institutions that enable newcomers to enter and learn the ways of the new country. And it’s not just immigrants who feel cities are safe places to live. All demographic minorities (e.g., older single people, racial minorities) feel less conspicuous and odd in cities where more of the people in their group live. Cities, then, continue to thrive today because significant numbers of people perceive them to be safe places to live — in the broadest sense of the term.

DIVERSITY

Second, the biblical understanding of a city also implies greater *diversity*, which is a natural result of density and safety. In the church in Antioch, we see leaders from different ethnic groups (Acts 13:1) — a natural occurrence when the gospel goes forth in cities, in which many different people groups reside. Because minorities find them to be safe places to live, cities tend to

become racially and culturally diverse. And this is not the full extent of their diversity. Cities are marked by diversity not just of population but of land use as well.

Human society requires several elements:

- an economic order, where people work and business transactions take place
- a cultural order, where people pursue scholarship, art, and theater
- a political-legal order, where cases are decided and governing officials meet

If you think of these elements as components of a pizza (tomato sauce, cheese, pepperoni, dough), the city is a place where every neighborhood is a slice of pizza. Along with residences, it has places to work, shop, read, learn, enjoy art and music, worship, and play, as well as public government buildings such as town halls and courts. All are mixed and compacted together within walking distance. In ancient times, rural areas and even villages could not provide all these elements; only cities could sustain them all. This is why some define a city as a “walkable, mixed-use settlement.”⁸ And in modern times, the dominant arrangement — the suburb — deliberately avoids this urban pattern. Suburbs are normally dedicated to large, single-use zones — so places to live, work, play, and learn are separated from one another and are reachable only by car, usually through pedestrian-hostile zones. Suburbs and rural areas have the pizza ingredients, but not in pizza form. It is tomatoes here, dough there, and pepperoni over there.¹⁰

CITIES INCREASE PRODUCTIVITY

In his book *The Triumph of the City*, Edward Glaeser writes the following:

The only reason why companies put up with the high labor and land costs of being in a city is that the city creates productivity advantages that offset those costs. Americans who live in

metropolitan areas with more than a million residents are, on average, more than 50 percent more productive than Americans who live in smaller metropolitan areas. These relationships are the same even when we take into account the education, experience, and industry of workers. They're even the same if we take individual workers' IQs into account...

Echoing antiurbanites throughout the ages, Mahatma Gandhi said that “the true India is to be found not in its few cities, but in its 700,000 villages” and “the growth of the nation depends not on cities, but [on] its villages.” The great man was wrong. India's growth depends almost entirely on its cities. There is a near-perfect correlation between urbanization and prosperity across nations. On average, as the share of a country's population that is urban rises by 10 percent, the country's per capita output increases by 30 percent. Per capita incomes are almost four times higher in those countries where a majority live in cities than in those countries where a majority of people live in rural areas.⁹

PRODUCTIVITY AND CREATIVITY

Third, in the Bible, cities were places of greater *productivity* and *creativity*. As we will see below, human culture — technology, architecture, the arts — began to develop as cities were built (see Gen 4; 11). The city features street life and marketplaces, bringing about more person-to-person interactions and exchanges in a day than are possible anywhere else. The more often people of the same profession come together, the more they stimulate new ideas and the faster these new ideas spread. The greater the supply of talent, the greater the productivity of that talent, and the demand for it follows. As a testimony to this fact, the purpose of modern conventions is *connection* — a place where people connect with expertise, peers, money, and other resources — and the best way to facilitate these connections is to create a temporary city! All the connections lead in the end to creativity — new alliances, ideas, art, and movements.

So ever since the beginning of recorded history, cities have been the centers of cultural intensity — for better or for worse. And what makes a city a city is not so much population size but proximity. Edward Glaeser writes, “Cities are the absence of physical space between people.”¹¹ This is what gives the city its distinctiveness and potency among all other human living arrangements.

THE CITY THROUGHOUT THE OLD TESTAMENT

We have said the Bible has a balanced understanding of how both good and evil operate in a city. We will call this the “tension” of the biblical view of the city. The tension takes time to come into focus, as the city plays a definite role at every stage in the history of salvation. As redemptive history progresses, the Bible moves from a largely negative view of the city (emphasizing the city’s rebellion) to a more positive one (emphasizing the city’s strengths, power, and strategic importance). To illustrate, we turn to a detailed study of the city in early biblical history.

THE PRIMEVAL CITY

The first occurrence of the word *city* (‘îr) in the Bible is in Genesis 4:17, where Cain, after committing fratricide and being sent away from the presence of the Lord, settles east of Eden in the land of Nod (Gen 4:16). Cain, the rebel, then *builds a city*.¹² This has led some to see “a possible reflection of the antiurban bias in Genesis.”¹³ But this association misses the subtleties of the narrative. First, the founding of the city comes as the result of Cain’s search for security in the world and of God’s granting his request (Gen 4:14–15). In other words, the city is seen as a refuge, even from the very beginning. In addition, Genesis 4:17–22 links the founding of the city with the beginnings of the creation of culture. Immediately after Cain establishes city life, we see the first development of the arts in the musicianship of Jubal (v. 21) and of technology in the tool making of Tubal-Cain (v. 22). Architecture, agriculture, the arts, and technology all begin when cities begin. Cities are places of human productivity.

This list of cultural expressions would have been shocking to Israel’s ancient Near Eastern neighbors who believed that cultural advances like the

sciences, writing, and the arts were the product of divine or mythological characters. The historical, human nature of their origins runs counter to the prevailing cultural view of the ancient Near East. In the Genesis narrative, we see man becoming a contributor under God in the ongoing work of creation, through the development of culture. We learn that city life is not to be seen as simply a punishment for humanity after the banishment from the garden. Rather the city has inherent capacities for bringing human beings together in such a way that enhances both security and culture making.

However, as can be seen in the line of Cain, these capacities, under the influence of sin and rebellion against God, can be generators of great evil. The song of Lamech, Cain's descendant, shows the Cainite city dwellers using all their advances to form a culture of death (Gen 4:23 – 24). Here is the first clear indicator of the dual nature of the city. Its capability for enormous good — for the culture-making creation of art, science, and technology — can be used to produce tremendous evil. Henri Blocher does not consider it a coincidence that the first mention of anti-God culture making is tied to the first instance of city building, but he warns against drawing the wrong conclusion:

It is no doubt significant that [in Genesis 4] progress in arts and in engineering comes from the “city” of the Cainites. Nevertheless, we are not to conclude from this that civilization as such is... the fruit of sin. Such a conclusion would lead us to Manichaeism or to the views of Jean-Jacques Rousseau... The Bible condemns neither the city (for it concludes with the vision of the City of God) nor art and engineering.¹⁴

Blocher may be responding to writers such as Geerhardus Vos, who in his *Biblical Theology* points to “the problem of the city” and asserts that “the city, while an accumulator of the energies of culture, is also an accumulator of potencies of evil (Amos 3:9; Micah 1:5).”¹⁵ Sometimes these seats of culture making can be established to bring glory to God's name (1 Cor 10:31) and therefore be a means of serving God and neighbor (e.g., Bezalel in Exod 31:3 – 5), or they can be erected to “make a name for ourselves” (Gen 11:4), resulting in a culture of human pride, self-salvation, violence, and oppression (Gen 4:17 – 24). Vos adds that what makes the human city fallen is not its density of population (indeed, this is what makes it an “accumulator of the energies of culture”), but its “spirit of rebellious self-

dependence over against God.”¹⁶ A horse is a more valuable animal than a mouse, yet a crazed horse is capable of far more damage than a crazed mouse; so too a city’s strengths under sin can unleash more destructive evil. As the Genesis narrative unfolds, we see that warring with the city’s great potential is a profound bent toward corruption and idolatry.

For most of the rest of Genesis, the city is seen in a negative light. The city is mentioned in connection with the accursed Ham (Gen 10:12). The next substantive appearance is in Genesis 11:4 when the people dwelling in the plain of Shinar (11:2) gather together *to build a city*. The naming of Shinar is significant because of its associations with Babylon (see Gen 10:10; Isa 11:11; Dan 1:2). It is in this city that the people gather as one and say to each other, “Come, let’s make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” The writer of Genesis states:

HISTORY OR MYTH?

Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna states:

The list [in Gen 4:17 – 22] constitutes a silent polemic against the mythological concepts of the ancient world, which attributed the advance of culture to divine or semidivine figures. Mesopotamian tradition knew of the seven *Apkallu*, or mythical sages, half-fish and half-man, who rose out of the sea to reveal to man the sciences, the social system, writing, and art... For Egyptians, it was the god Thot who invented the scales and the balances; Osiris who taught humans agriculture and the arts of life; and Ptah who was the special patron of artists, artificers, and men of letters. In the Ugaritic-Phoenician area, the god Koshar, the divine artisan and smith, was credited with the discovery of the use of iron and the fishing tackle. In the Greek sphere, it was Athena who invented the plough and the rake and who taught both the useful and the elegant arts, while Apollo founded towns and invented the flute and the lyre.

This phenomenon, known as euhemerism or the divinization of the benefactors of humanity, was common to the ancient world. In [Gen 4:17 – 22] it is tacitly rejected. The development of human culture is demythologized and historicized... Man became a copartner with God in the world of creation. At the same time, the ascription of the origins of technology and urban life to Cain and his line constitute an unfavorable, or at least a qualified, judgment of man’s material progress on the part of the Narrator, a recognition that it frequently outruns moral progress and that human ingenuity, so potentially beneficial, is often directed toward evil ends.¹⁷

They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar [again, the city is depicted as the place of technological achievement]. Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building.

Genesis 11:3 – 5, emphasis mine

The spirit of the line of Cain reaches its climax in this effort to build the city of Babel. The new city and its tower are designed to help residents gain an identity apart from service to God. Here we see the essence of how cities can magnify our sinful drive for self-glorification and self-salvation. The efforts of the people working together for their own glory attract the notice of God, who reacts by confusing their language and scattering them “from there over all the earth,” lest they succeed in their plans. The result of God’s judgment was that they “stopped building the city” (v. 8).

THE PATRIARCHS AND THE CITY

The rest of Genesis continues to highlight the dark side of the city — particularly the infamous Sodom and Gomorrah. Again, God “goes down” to judge Sodom (Gen 18:21), just as he did with Babel. Babel, later called

Babylon in the Bible, comes to serve as the archetype for urban culture arrayed against God (see Isa 13:19). The Sodom narrative stands in the midst of a long period in which we see city dwellers opposed to God, while God's people remain rural nomads. God called Abram to leave Ur, one of the great cities of the day, and remain a shepherd all his life. Genesis shows us that Abram's nephew Lot made a grave mistake in choosing urban life. While he remained a righteous man within Sodom and was distressed by the sinful lifestyle there, the behavior of his wife and daughters showed that Lot's decision to live in a city without a believing community led to spiritual disaster for his family.¹⁸

Nevertheless, we later learn that Abraham's refusal to enter the cities of his time and place lay in his longing for God's city: "By faith Abraham... lived in tents... For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb 11:8–10). If the city as a social form is intrinsically bad for human beings or for our faith, it wouldn't make sense for it to be idealized as the source of Abraham's sustaining hope. Cities in the service of human self-aggrandizement may work to unravel and destroy the world God made and to contest his lordship over it. But as we will see, the city form, in service to God, actually fulfills the will of God for human life.

ISRAEL AND THE CITY

With the establishment of Israel in the Promised Land, the biblical depiction of cities becomes more positive. When God settled the Israelites in Canaan, he commanded them to build cities of refuge: "Select... your cities of refuge, to which a person who has killed someone accidentally may flee. They will be places of refuge from the avenger, so that a person accused of murder may not die before he stands trial before the assembly" (Num 35:11–12). Why did God command the building of cities? Cities with walls and a gathered population could protect an accused person and conduct a trial in a way that villages and rural areas could not. Without cities, a crime or accident could lead to an endless cycle of violence and reprisals. The safety and density of cities enabled a system of jurisprudence to develop around the rule of law. There the elders could hear and settle cases in peace

(Deut 19:11–12). God commands the establishment of cities in Israel to establish justice.

But the biggest change in the city's role within redemptive history comes with the establishment of Jerusalem. Unlike Babel, established "to make a name for ourselves" (Gen 11:4), Jerusalem becomes the city that is the dwelling place for God's Name (1 Kgs 14:21). This begins when Jerusalem is captured by David (2 Sam 5), the ark of the covenant is brought to the city (2 Sam 6), and finally the temple is built by Solomon. Jerusalem is appointed to be an urban culture that is a witness to the nations and a symbol of the future City of God (2 Sam 7:8–16). God directs that the temple be built on Zion, an elevated location within the city, so it rises above the city as its "skyscraper." God's city is different from human cities (like Babel) where skyscrapers are designed for their builders' own prosperity and prominence. By contrast, God's city is "the joy of the whole earth" (Ps 48:2). The city's cultural riches are produced, not for the glory of the producers, but for the joy of the entire earth and the honor of God. The urban society in God's plan is based on service, not on selfishness.

THE PROPHETS AND THE CITY

From the time of David onward, the prophets speak of God's future world as an urban society. Bible scholar J. Alec Motyer writes, "The Isaianic literature could be accurately described as 'the book of the city.'" ¹⁹ He notes that in Isaiah, *Jerusalem*, *Zion*, *mount/mountain*, and *city* are interchangeable terms showing the city's centrality in the divine thought and plan.²⁰ At this point the spiritual battle lines of history become clear. The great spiritual conflict of history is not between city dwellers and country dwellers but is truly "a tale of two cities." It is a struggle between Babylon, representing the city of man, and Jerusalem, representing the city of God.²¹ The earthly city is a metaphor for human life structured without God, created for self-salvation, self-service, and self-glorification. It portrays a scene of exploitation and injustice. But God's city is a society based on his glory and on sacrificial service to God and neighbor. This city offers a scene of peace and righteousness. As Saint Augustine put it, "The humble City is the society of holy men and good angels; the proud city is

the society of wicked men and evil angels. The one City began with the love of God; the other had its beginnings in the love of self.”²²

John concludes his Apocalypse (Rev 22:19) by warning those who take words away (*aphele*) from “this book of prophecy” that God will take away (*aphelei*) from them their “share in the tree of life and *in the holy city*” (*kai ek tes poleos tes hagian*, emphasis mine). Throughout Revelation, John draws a consistent contrast between “the great city,” Babylon,²³ and the city of God, or Jerusalem.²⁴ The former receives the eschatological judgment of God, while the latter receives (and mediates) eschatological blessing and salvation.²⁵

THE CITY OF EXILE

When we get to the book of Jonah, we come to a new phase in the unfolding biblical theology of the city. Throughout Israel’s history, prophets are raised up and sent to preach to God’s people, to call them to repentance and renewal. But Jonah is given a unique mission. For the first time, a prophet is sent to preach to a pagan, foreign city — Nineveh. Jonah’s response is first (in Jonah 1–2) to run away from the city. In chapter 3, after his famous encounter with the great fish, Jonah does preach to Nineveh — and the people respond in repentance. God does not destroy the city as he had warned he would. This response displeases Jonah greatly, and in Jonah 4:10–11, God scolds Jonah for his lack of compassion for the lost people of Nineveh. Listen to God’s argument:

Then the LORD said, “You had compassion on the plant for which you did not work and which you did not cause to grow, which came up overnight and perished overnight. Should I not have compassion on Nineveh, the great city in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know the difference between their right and left hand, as well as many animals?”

Jonah 4:10–11 NASB

Here God makes a case for the importance of the city from the sheer number of the human beings in residence. He is saying, “How can you look at *so many* lost people and not find compassion in your heart?” This is a critical reason that the city is so important today. We might call it the *visceral* argument for the city. God “has compassion on all he has made”

(Ps 145:9). But of all the things he has made, human beings have pride of place in his heart, because they were made in his image (Gen 9:6; James 3:9). Cities, quite literally, have more of the image of God per square inch than any other place on earth. How can we not be drawn to such masses of humanity if we care about the same things that God cares about?

Why did God send an Israelite prophet to a pagan city? Some have argued that this is intended to prepare the Jews for the next stage of their own history — the period of exile — in which they will be residing not in Jerusalem but literally in Babel — in Babylon. The importance of Jerusalem had been obvious; it was to be “the joy of the whole earth” (Ps 48:2), a model urban society demonstrating to the world what human life under God’s lordship could be. But what happens when Israel goes to live in a wicked, pagan, bloodthirsty city in Jeremiah 28–29? How will the people of God relate to the great human cities of the earth now?

THE CITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Some basic sources that cover this topic include the following:

Boice, James Montgomery. *Two Cities, Two Loves*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996.

Conn, Harvie, “Christ and the City: Biblical Themes for Building Urban Theology Models.” Pages 222 – 86 in *Discipling the City: Theological Reflections on Urban Mission*. Roger Greenway, ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979.

Conn, Harvie M., and Manuel Ortiz. *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001.

Kline, Meredith G. “Eschatological Sanctions” and “Prophetic Cult in the City of Man.” Pages 100 – 17 and 165 – 70 in *Kingdom Prologue*. South Hamilton, Mass.: Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1993.

Linthicum, Robert. *City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990.

Ryken, Leland, James Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds. "City." Pages 150 – 54 in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998.

Timmer, J. "The Bible and the City." Pages 21 – 25 in *The Reformed Journal* 23 (October 1973).

A major part of the Babylonian Empire's strategy was to eradicate the spiritual identity of its conquered peoples. A defeated nation's professional and elite classes were often taken to Babylon to live before being allowed to return home.²⁶ Judah had been deported, partially in the hope that the children and grandchildren of the Israelites would assimilate and lose their identity as a distinct people. The false prophet Hananiah, who could not imagine Israel's life in Babylon long-term, dishonestly prophesied that God would bring Israel back to Jerusalem within two years (Jer 28:3 – 4). Had the exiles followed Hananiah's advice, they would have remained disengaged in Babylon, waiting indefinitely for God's imminent deliverance.

Instead God, through the prophet Jeremiah, contradicts both the Babylonians' strategy and the false prophet's counsel. On the one hand, God tells his people to "increase in number there; do not decrease" (Jer 29:6) to retain their distinct community identity and to grow, but he also tells them to settle down and engage in the life of the great city.²⁷ They are to build homes and plant gardens (v. 5). Most striking of all, God calls them to serve the city — to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" and to "pray to the Lord for it" (v. 7). While living in Babylon, they are not simply to increase their tribe in a ghetto within the city; they are to use their resources to benefit the common good.

This is quite a balance! From Genesis 11 all the way through Revelation, Babylon is represented as the epitome of a civilization built on selfishness, pride, and violence — the ultimate city of man. The values of this city contrast absolutely with those of the city of God; yet here the citizens of the city of God are called to be the *very best* residents of this particular city of man. God commands the Jewish exiles not to attack, despise, or flee the city — but to seek its peace, to love the city as they grow in numbers.

God is still primarily concerned with his plan of salvation. He must establish his people; the gospel must be proclaimed; human beings must be reconciled to him. Yet he assures his people that serving the good of this pagan city is part of this very plan: “If it prospers, you too will prosper” (Jer 29:7). Loving and serving the city not only shows love and compassion; doing so also strengthens the hands of the people of God, who bear the message of the gospel to the world. Because the Jews in exile obeyed this command, they accrued the influence and leverage needed to eventually return to and restore their homeland. God ties, as it were, the fortunes of the people of God to the effectiveness of their urban ministry.

Sadly, there has never been a city on earth that is not saturated with human sin and corruption. Indeed, to paraphrase a Woody Allen joke, cities are just like everywhere else, only much more so. They are both better and worse, both easier and harder to live in, both more inspiring and oppressive, than other places.

As redemptive history unfolds, we begin to see how the tension of the city will be resolved. The turn in the relationship between the people of God and the pagan city becomes a key aspect of God’s plan to bless the nations and redeem the world. In the New Testament, we find cities playing an important role in the rapid growth of the early church and in spreading the gospel message of God’s salvation.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. How would you describe your own attitude toward cities? Indifferent? Hostile? Romanticized? Positive? In what way has this chapter challenged your attitude toward cities? not be drawn to such masses of humanity if we care about the same things that God cares about?” What are some of the reasons that people avoid ministry in the city? What are some of the reasons that they are attracted to urban ministry?
2. Cities are places of safety, diversity, and productivity. How do each one of these characteristics uniquely define urban culture?

4. How can you and the community of believers to which you belong work to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city”? What does this look like in your context?
3. Keller writes, “Cities, quite literally, have more of the image of God per square inch than any other place on earth. How can we

CHAPTER 1 — THE TENSION OF THE CITY

1. Cities have a glamorous attraction to young adults today, and some Christians may imbibe the depiction of cities as consumer heavens. See “Is London a Luxury Resort?” and “The Consumer City: Vancouver,” in Edward Glaeser, *The Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier* (New York: Penguin, 2011).
2. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (ed. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III [Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998], 150) speaks of the city as “humanity *en masse*” and therefore “humanity ‘writ large.’”
3. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (p. 150) defines *city* as a “fortified habitation.”
4. See Frank Frick, *The City in Ancient Israel* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), 79.
5. Translation by Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, rev. ed. (Word Biblical Commentary 21; Nashville: Nelson, 2002), 210.
6. See Frick, *City in Ancient Israel*, 79.
7. See Franklin E. Zimring, *The City That Became Safe: New York’s Lessons for Urban Crime and Its Control* (New York: Oxford University Press), 2011. Across all categories, New York City’s crime rate is down 80 percent from twenty years ago. The drop came without an increase in prisoners incarcerated (the traditional conservative solution for crime) or a decrease in poverty (the traditional liberal solution for crime). Smarter law enforcement only accounts for about half of the drop. Zimring concludes that many of the factors that changed attitudes and behavior are simply being missed because social theorists — both conservative and liberal — simply don’t know what to look for. He writes (p. 204), “The specific mechanisms at work in New York City [that have led to decreased crime]... are unknown.” Nevertheless, he states (p. 202) that this twenty-year decline essentially proves the “inessentiality of crime to urban life,” thus putting to rest one of the deepest fears generated in the last century about cities. At the end of his book, he writes (p. 217), “We now know that life-threatening crime is not an incurable urban disease in the United States.” It is interesting to note that Zimring does not consider as one possible factor the growth of evangelical churches, adding somewhere between a half million to one million Christians to the NYC

population over the past generation (see Michael Luo, “In New York, Billy Graham Will Find an Evangelical Force,” *New York Times* [June 21, 2005], www.nytimes.com/2005/06/21/nyregion/21evangelical.html?ref=billygraham; see also the website www.nycreligion.info/).

8. See, e.g., Philip Bess, “A Realist Philosophical Case for Urbanism and against Sprawl: Part One,” www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2011/07/3379 (accessed January 23, 2012).
9. Glaeser, *Triumph of the City*, 7–8.
0. The classic text describing and celebrating the density of population, mixed-land use, and street life is Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961), esp. part 1 “The Peculiar Nature of Cities,” and part 2, “The Conditions for City Diversity.”
1. Glaeser, *Triumph of the City*, 6.
2. It should be noted that there is some scholarly debate about who actually builds the city: Is it Cain, or is it his son Enoch? The issue has to do with the name of the city. The name of Enoch’s son, Irad, sounds like Eridu, generally regarded in Mesopotamian tradition to be the first city to be founded (see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* [Word Biblical Commentary 1a; Nashville: Nelson, 1987], 110–12).
3. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: Norton, 1997), 19.
4. Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning: The Opening Chapters of Genesis*, trans. David G. Preston (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1984), 199.
5. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 294.
6. Gen 18:16 – 33; 19:16 – 36; see 2 Pet 2:7 – 8.
7. Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis Commentary* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 35–36.
8. *Ibid.*, 295. It should be noted that Vos generally saw the power of the city to create and influence culture as being a negative influence in human history. Meredith Kline in his *Kingdom Prologue* is more balanced, saying the city is a “divine ordinance” (p. 101). However, Kline sees the city as an instrument of God’s common grace. Its effect on culture when used well is only “remedial,” a way to resist the tendencies of human evil and is not a way to bring in the kingdom of God, contrary to those in the Kuyperian school (pp. 105–6). For more on the related debate about Christ and culture, see part 5 of this volume.
9. J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity, 1993), 16.

10. Ibid., 17.
11. Note the idea of the two cities worked out in Isaiah 13 – 27. The theology is worked out most thoroughly in Augustine’s *The City of God (De Civitate Dei)*.
12. Augustine, *City of God*, 14:13.
13. Revelation 11:8, 13; 16:19; 17:18; 18:10, 16, 18–19, 21; see also 2:13 — Pergamum, “your city — where Satan lives.”
14. Revelation 3:12; 11:2; 20:9; 21:2, 10, 14 – 27; 22:2 – 3, 14.
15. Jerusalem, as history has shown, was not the city of God per se. The prophets showed how far short the earthly Jerusalem fell from its future antitype (Jer 13:9–14; Mic 3:11–12). It was only a mixture of the city of man and the city of God, at its best pointing beyond itself to that ultimate city (see Jer 3:16–17).
16. See 2 Kings 24:14, where “all the officers and fighting men, and all the craftsmen and artisans” were exiled. The professional classes were taken and the poor left behind. Daniel 1:3 – 5 describes how the nobility and cream of Israel’s ruling classes were to receive instruction in Babylonian ways and culture. Tremper Longman III (*Daniel* [NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999], 47) observes that Nebuchadnezzar wanted to assimilate conquered people groups into Babylonian culture so they would lose their distinct cultural identities and thus become compliant.
17. While Jeremiah 28 calls the Jews to invest in the life of the city, Daniel 1 warns them against defiling themselves through overassimilation to the pagan culture. Both of these texts were given to the exilic community for guidance. Thanks to Richard Coekin for this insight.

CHAPTER 2

REDEMPTION AND THE CITY

As we saw in the last chapter, God unexpectedly calls Israel to serve the pagan city of Babylon — to seek its prosperity — while living in exile there. And in a sense, the people of God have yet to return from that state of exile. In this chapter, we will see how this exilic model helps us understand the relationship of the church to the city in New Testament times, and even today — and how God plans to resolve the great tension of the city at the end of time.¹

During the exile, Israel no longer existed in the form of a nation-state with a government and laws. Instead, it existed as a countercultural fellowship contained within other nation-states. In many ways, this is also the form of the New Testament church, as Peter and James suggest when they address believers as “the Dispersion” (Jas 1:1 ESV) and “exiles” (1 Pet 1:1 ESV). Twice Peter uses *parepidemoui* as a word for “exiles” — a word we sometimes translate as “resident aliens.” *Parepidemoui* were citizens of one country and yet full-time residents of another. Their primary allegiance was to another country, and that country’s culture was formative for their beliefs and practices. Yet they lived in their country of residence as full participants in its life. In other words, “resident aliens” lived neither as natives nor as tourists. Though they were not permanently rooted, neither were they merely travelers who were just passing through.

RESIDENT ALIENS AND CULTURE

In an article on 1 Peter titled “Soft Difference,” Miroslav Volf shows how the tension Peter envisioned between persecution and

attraction and between evangelism and service does not fit neatly into any of the historic models of relating Christ to culture. Unlike models that call for a transformation of culture or a Christendom-like alliance of church and state, Peter expects the gospel to always be highly offensive and never completely embraced or accepted by the world. This is a caution to those Christians who hope to bring about an essentially Christian culture. And unlike models that call solely for evangelism and are highly pessimistic about influencing culture, Peter nonetheless expects *some* aspects of Christian faith and practice to be highly attractive in any pagan culture, thus influencing people to praise God.²

Christians are now considered citizens of “the Jerusalem that is above” (Gal 4:26; see Phil 3:20). Indeed, in a significant statement, Jesus tells his followers that they are a “city on a hill” (Matt 5:14). Communities of Christ-followers are God’s “city” within every earthly city. They are the renewed people of God (see Isa 32:14; Dan 9:16). Their ultimate allegiance belongs to God and his kingdom, yet, in keeping with the term used by Peter and James, believers are not just “passing through” their earthly cities. This reflects the same balanced attitude that Jewish exiles were called to have toward Babylon. The Jewish exiles were not to hate the pagan city as they bided their time, waiting for the day of their departure. They were to be fully involved in its life, working in it and praying for it. At the same time, they were not to adopt its culture or lose their distinctive identity as God’s holy people. God called the Jewish exiles to accept and embrace the tension of the city for the sake of God’s glory — and this is exactly what today’s Christians are called to do as well.

Resident aliens will always live with both praise and misunderstanding. Jesus taught that Christians’ “good deeds” are to be visible to the pagans (Matt 5:16), but he also warns his followers to expect misunderstanding and persecution (v. 10). In a similar way, Peter calls Christians to live in the midst of pagan society in such a way that others will see their “good deeds and glorify God” (1 Pet 2:12), but he warns them to expect persecution nonetheless. Both Peter and Jesus indicate that these “good deeds” (which

in the Greek meant not merely personal morality but also acts of service to others) will lead at least some pagans to glorify God.

Despite these similarities, the Christian church differs from the Jewish exiles in two significant ways. First, the Jews “increase in number” in Babylon almost exclusively by having children and growing families (Jer 29:6). The church must also multiply and increase in the pagan city as God’s new humanity, but this happens especially through evangelism and discipling (Acts 6:1, 7; 9:31; 12:24). We also see a significant shift in God’s call to mission between the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, mission was *centripetal*; the flow was in toward the center. Israel was called to be an obedient people, becoming a society that displayed God’s glory for the nations to see (Deut 4:6 – 8). The nations were called to look and to “come in” and worship God. But in the New Testament, mission becomes *centrifugal* — moving outward from the center. The people of God are sent out to the world to proclaim the gospel (Matt 28:16 – 20; Acts 1–2). The Babylonian exile and Jonah’s mission are foreshadowings of this future change.

Second, despite their engagement with Babylonian society, the Jews still kept the Mosaic code, so that their dress, food, and other practices continued to set them culturally apart from the Babylonians (see, e.g., Dan 1:8). Their dietary laws alone virtually dictated that Jews eat separately from pagans. In the book of Acts, God has to send Peter a vivid and forceful vision to get him to even consider accepting an invitation to enter a Gentile soldier’s home (10:28 – 29). In Christ, these ceremonial and cultural regulations and distinctions become obsolete (Mark 7; Acts 15:1–35). Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners as a strategy for ministry. Adopting these New Testament teachings frees Christians to participate in a city’s culture more fully than the Jews in Babylon could. However, this freedom also makes the danger of assimilation and compromise more acute for Christians. As future citizens of heaven, Christians must see and avoid the idolatries and injustices of their culture, even as they continue to enjoy its common-grace blessings.

So why should we apply the exhortations of Jeremiah 29 to the church today? In the Bible, we see the people of God living in three configurations. From Abraham’s day onward, God’s people existed as an *extended*

biological family. From the days of Moses, they existed as a *nation-state*, with laws and a king and an army to enforce those laws by civil sanctions. During the exile, however, God's people existed as a *dispersed fellowship of congregations* (synagogues) living in many different nation-states. God's laws did not take a civil form during that period — the disobedient were expelled from the congregation, but they were not executed.

JONAH'S MISSION

The book of Jonah foreshadows the centrifugal New Testament mission (sending believers out) rather than the centripetal Old Testament mission (calling nonbelievers in). Jonah is the only Old Testament prophet sent to a pagan city to call it to repentance. God's final statement is striking. The Lord calls Jonah to love the great pagan city of Nineveh because of the vast number of its spiritually blind inhabitants (Jonah 4:10 – 11).³

THE “CRUCIALITY” OF CITY MINISTRY IN THE BIBLE

Many of the reasons that city ministry was so effective in the early church have been outlined by Wayne Meeks in *The First Urban Christians* and by Harvie Conn in his many books. They identify three “crucial” factors:

- 1. Cultural cruciality.** In the village, someone might win its one or two lawyers to Christ. However, if you want to win the legal profession, which will influence all lawyers, you must go to the city, where you will find the law schools and the law journal publishers — the key institutions of influence in that profession.
- 2. Global cruciality.** In the village, someone can win over the single people group living there, since rural areas are often sociologically homogeneous. But if you share the gospel in a city, you can reach dozens of different national and ethnic

groups. Indeed, you can reach them through one language — the *lingua franca* of that place. The gospel then travels back into many different cultures through immigrants who return to visit or remain in their homelands.

- 3. Personal cruciality.** In the village, people live in a culture that tends to resist change and is more conservative and traditional. However, because of the diversity and mobility of the cities, urbanites are more open to new ideas — such as the gospel! The pressure and diversity of the city environment make even the most gospel-hostile people open to new ways of thinking and living.

After the exile, the Jews went back to being a nation-state. Yet the New Testament does not envision the Christian church in this way. Instead, it shows that *the church continues to exist as a dispersion of people from every nation under heaven* (Acts 2), just as Israel did in the exile (see Jas 1:1; 1 Pet 1:1). Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that the church should continue to relate to the human cities of our time, not as the people of God did under Abraham, Moses, or David, but as they did during the time of the exile.

CITY MINISTRY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

In the early church, God's redemptive mission no longer centered on a particular city such as Jerusalem or Babylon. All of the cities of the world become primary targets of God's mission. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* in its article on "City" states the following:

The world that we enter in the book of Acts is the most modern in all the Bible by virtue of its urban identity. Most of the action occurs in the famous cities of the Greco-Roman world, not in the local villages or the countryside. This prevalingly metropolitan world is, moreover, international and cosmopolitan. There is a sense in which the city is vindicated in the history of the early church — not in the sense that the city is mainly good or cordial to the gospel but in the sense that the city is where

*most people now live and where the influential power structures exist... It is easy to see that the mission strategy of the early church was to evangelize the city. It is no exaggeration to say that in Acts the church is almost exclusively associated with the city.*⁴

In Acts 17, Paul travels to Athens, the *intellectual* center of the Greco-Roman world. In Acts 18, he goes to Corinth, one of the *commercial* centers of the empire. In Acts 19, he arrives in Ephesus, perhaps the Roman world's *religious* center, the hub of many pagan cults and particularly of the imperial cult, with three temples for emperor worship. By the end of Acts, Paul has made it to Rome itself, the empire's capital of *military and political power*. John Stott concludes, "It seems to have been Paul's deliberate policy to move purposefully from one strategic city-centre to the next."⁵

Paul's ministry in Ephesus reveals several of the strengths of urban ministry. In Acts 19:1 we read, "While Apollos was at Corinth, Paul took the road through the interior and arrived at Ephesus." Stott remarks that virtually all the roads in that part of the world went through Ephesus.⁶ Similarly, all major cities are the unavoidable crossroads for their regions and societies. Paul entered Ephesus and rented the "lecture hall of Tyrannus" (v. 9). Stott notes that the lecture hall would have been a school that stood vacant for two to three hours at midday when people took a break from work for a meal and rest.⁷ There Paul did gospel *dialeghomenos*, arguing and persuading his hearers dialogically — not simply by preaching but by making his case that the Messiah was Jesus and engaging with people's questions and objections. "This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord" (v. 10). Because Paul's ministry took place in the region's major city, virtually everyone in the Lycus River valley would have been exposed to the preaching of the gospel.

Stott observes that "all the inhabitants of Asia visited Ephesus from time to time, to buy or sell, visit a relative, frequent the baths, attend the games in the stadium, watch a drama in the theatre, or worship the goddess [Artemis]."⁸ By reaching the city, Paul reached all segments of society, as evidenced in the letter to the Colossians. In this epistle, Paul follows up with disciples in cities along the Lycus Valley — Laodicea, Hierapolis, and

Colossae (Col 4:13–16)— who were likely converted through his Ephesian ministry, even though he had never visited those places personally. This suggests that if the gospel is unfolded at the urban center, you can effectively reach the region and the surrounding society. Stott cites J. A. Alexander’s insight that Acts shows the spread of the gospel “by the gradual establishment of radiating centres or sources of influence at certain salient points throughout a large part of the Empire.”¹⁰ Stott concludes:

*This process of urbanization... constitutes a great challenge to the Christian church. On the one hand, there is an urgent need for Christian planners and architects, local government politicians, urban specialists, developers and community social workers, who will work for justice, peace, freedom and beauty in the city. On the other, Christians need to move into the cities, and experience the pains and pressures of living there, in order to win city-dwellers for Christ. Commuter Christianity (living in salubrious suburbia and commuting to an urban church) is no substitute for incarnational involvement.*¹¹

AS THE CITY GOES, SO GOES THE CULTURE

In his book *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologist Rodney Stark discusses the strategic importance of the early Christians’ reaching city dwellers to influence the broader culture:

To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity...

People had been enduring catastrophes for centuries without the aid of Christian theology or social structures. Hence I am by no means suggesting that the misery of the ancient world caused the advent of Christianity. What I am going to argue is

that once Christianity did appear, its superior capacity for meeting these chronic problems soon became evident and played a major role in its ultimate triumph... [for what Christians] brought was not simply an urban movement, but a *new culture*.⁹

The early church was largely an *urban* movement that won the people of the Roman cities to Christ, while most of the rural countryside remained pagan. Because the Christian faith captured the cities, however, it eventually captured the ancient Greco-Roman world. As the city went, so went the culture.¹³ Why? The urban elites were, of course, important, but the Christian church did not focus on them alone. Then, as now, the cities were filled with the poor, and urban Christians' commitment to the poor was visible and striking. Through the cities, Christians changed history and culture by winning the elites as well as by identifying deeply with the poor. Richard Fletcher, in *The Barbarian Conversion*, shows that this same thing occurred during the Christian mission to Europe from AD 500 to 1500.¹⁴

THE COMMON-GRACE CITY

Bible scholar Meredith Kline notes how the development of culture in Genesis arises from the development of cities:

The city is not to be regarded as an evil invention of... fallen man... The ultimate goal set before humanity at the very beginning was that human culture should take city-form... There should be an urban structuring of human historical existence... The cultural mandate given at creation was a mandate to build the city. Now, after the fall, the city is still a benefit, serving humankind as refuge from the howling wilderness condition into which the fallen human race, exiled from paradise, has been driven... The common grace city has remedial benefits even in a fallen world. It becomes the drawing together of resources, strength, and talent no longer just for

mutual complementation in the task of developing the resources of the created world, but now a pooling of power for defense against attack, and as an administrative community of welfare for the relief of those destitute by reason of the cursing of the ground.¹²

CONSUMMATION: CULTIVATING THE CITY

Beginning with the Old Testament prophets, God's future redeemed world is depicted as a city. And in Revelation 21–22, when God's creational and redemptive intentions are fully realized, we see that the result is indeed a city, with walls and gates and streets. In some ways, this city is unlike our current cities, more of a "garden-city" that perfectly balances the glorious benefits of human density and diversity with the beauty and peace of nature. The city of God's old enemy, Babylon, is finally overthrown, and God's people thrive in peace and productivity (Rev 18).

What is most striking about this holy city is that it has not been built from scratch. In its midst flows a crystal river, and on each side of the river is "the tree of life" that bears fruit and leaves to heal the nations of all the effects of the divine covenant curse (Rev 22:1–3). This city is, in fact, the same garden we see in the Genesis account, which was also marked by a central river and the presence of the tree of life (Gen 2:8–10), but it has been expanded and remade into the garden-city of God. *It is the garden of Eden*, yet faithfully cultivated — the fulfillment of the purposes of the Eden of God.¹⁵ Indeed, the very word used for "garden" in Genesis 2 denotes not a wilderness but a "park,"¹⁶ a well-tended plot of land one would find in a city or near a royal palace.

Why is this important? God's directive that Adam and Eve "rule over" the earth (Gen 1:28) is often called "the cultural mandate." This is a call for them to "image God's work for the world by taking up our work in the world."¹⁷ It is a call to develop a culture and build a civilization that honors God. Gardening (the original human vocation) is a paradigm for cultural development. A gardener neither leaves the ground as is, nor does he destroy it. Instead, he rearranges it to produce food and plants for human

life. He *cultivates* it. (The words *culture* and *cultivate* come from the same root.) Every vocation is in some way a response to, and an extension of, the primal, Edenic act of cultivation. Artists, for example, take the raw material of the five senses and human experience to produce music and visual media; literature and painting; dance and architecture and theater. In a similar way, technologists and builders take the raw material of the physical world and creatively rearrange it to enhance human productivity and flourishing. Because we are called to create culture in this way, and because cities are the places of greatest cultural production, I believe that city building is a crucial part of fulfilling the mandate.

As we have already pointed out, the first evidence for this connection between the city, the culture, and the flourishing of human beings is found in Genesis 4, where Cain is “building a city” (v. 17). Immediately after the city is built, we see the first development of the arts, agriculture, and technology — the beginnings of the human cultural creativity that God had called for. Even though Cain’s purpose in building the city was rebellious, its power was good. The tension of the city was present from its very start.

The cultural mandate, our failure to fulfill it in accord with God’s design, its connection to city building, and the progressive importance of the city of man to the city of God — all these plotlines resolve at the end of the book of Revelation. Though the first Adam failed to faithfully heed God’s call, the second Adam — Jesus Christ — *will* fulfill the mandate of the first Adam. He will save a people, subdue the earth, and bring in a civilization that honors the Father (1 Cor 15:22 – 25). Since the Bible reveals to us that a city is the final result of the work of the second Adam on our behalf, it seems fair to assume this was what God had intended when he gave the cultural mandate to the first Adam. In other words, God called Adam and Eve to expand the borders of the garden, and when God’s will is finally done and Jesus fulfills the cultural mandate on our behalf, the garden of Eden becomes a garden *city*.

Many Christians assume that the final goal of Christ’s redemption is to return us to a rural, Edenic world. Based on this assumption, the work of Christians is exclusively to evangelize and disciple. But Revelation shows us this is not the case. God’s intention for human endeavor is that it raise up civilizations — cities — that glorify him and steward the endless wonders

and riches that God put into the created world. This insight has led Harvie Conn to write that the cultural mandate “could just as easily be called an urban mandate.”¹⁸

The city is an intrinsically positive social form with a checkered past and a beautiful future. As redemptive history progresses, we see that God’s people begin as wanderers and nomads outside of cities, and as city rebels (Babel). Then God directs them to be city builders and rebuilders (Jerusalem) and city-loving exiles (Babylon). In New Testament times, the people of God become city missionaries (indeed, New Testament writings contain few glimpses of nonurban Christianity). Finally, when God’s future arrives in the form of a city, his people can finally be fully at home. The fallen nature of the city — the warping of its potential due to the power of sin — is finally overcome and resolved; the cultural mandate is complete; the capacities of city life are freed in the end to serve God. All of God’s people serve him in his holy city.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Keller writes, “The church should continue to relate to the human cities of our time, not as the people of God did under Abraham, Moses, or David, but as they did during the time of the exile.” In what ways is the situation of the Christian church different from that of the exiles in Babylon? In what ways is it similar? How does this affect the mission of the church today?
2. From Acts 17 through the end of the book of Acts, Paul has strategically traveled to the intellectual (Athens), commercial (Corinth), religious (Ephesus), and political (Rome) centers of the Roman world. What are the centers of power and influence in your own local context? How is your church seeking to strategically reach these different centers of cultural influence?
3. Keller writes, “Then, as now, the cities were filled with the poor, and urban Christians’ commitment to the poor was visible and striking.” Do you believe this is still true of the Christian church? If so, give an example. If not, how can this legacy be recaptured?

4. Keller writes, “Gardening (the original human vocation) is a paradigm for cultural development. A gardener neither leaves the ground as is, nor does he destroy it. Instead, he rearranges it to produce food and plants for human life. He *cultivates* it. (The words *culture* and *cultivate* come from the same root.) Every vocation is in some way a response to, and an extension of, the primal, Edenic act of cultivation.” Discuss how different vocations are a response to our call to cultivate culture. How does the creation mandate transform our understanding of work and vocation?

CHAPTER 2 — REDEMPTION AND THE CITY

1. Note the references to “Pauline Christianity” in Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2003); see also Todd D. Still and David G. Horrell, eds., *After the First Urban Christians: The Social-Scientific Study of Pauline Christianity Twenty-Five Years Later* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2009).
2. See Miroslav Volf, “Soft Difference,” www.yale.edu/faith/resources/x_volf_difference.html (accessed January 20, 2012).
3. For more on mission in the Old Testament, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2005); Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Mission in the Old Testament: Israel as a Light to the Nations* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).
4. Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 153, emphasis mine.
5. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World* (Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1990), 293.
6. *Ibid.*, 314.
7. *Ibid.*, 305.
8. *Ibid.*, 314.
9. Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997), 161–62.
0. Stott, *Message of Acts*, 293.
1. *Ibid.*, 292–93.

2. Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (South Hamilton, Mass.: Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1993), 101.
3. I recognize that other human factors were used by God to bring about the astonishing growth of the early church in its first three centuries. There was a cultural crisis in the Greco-Roman worldview, and the worship of the old pagan gods was dying out. Nevertheless, historians now realize how important it was for the influence and spread of the church that it first took root in the urban areas.
4. Richard Fletcher, *The Barbarian Conversion: From Paganism to Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California, 1999).
5. See Harvie Conn, "Christ and the City: Biblical Themes for Building Urban Theology Models," in *Discipling the City*, ed. Roger Greenway (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 222–86. Conn writes (p. 237), "The city is the fulfiller of the paradise of God... This eschatological strand repeatedly ties the future of the city with the original, sinless past of Eden and its restoration in Christ. Even under the curse, man's cultural calling will be maintained." In other words, the garden of Eden, had Adam not fallen, would have developed into the city seen in Revelation 21. It would have been a perfect city under God. In his essay, Conn explains that the city has the same three functions as the garden of God did, namely, it is (1) a place to cultivate the earth and "mine the cultural riches of creation," (2) a place to live in safety and security, and (3) a place to meet God.
6. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Word Biblical Commentary 1a; Nashville: Word, 1987), 61.
7. Gordon Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 256.
8. Harvie Conn and Manuel Ortiz, *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2001), 87.

CHAPTER 3

THE CALL TO THE CITY

Paul and other Christian missionaries went to great cities because when Christianity was planted there, it spread regionally (cities were the centers of transportation routes); it also spread globally (cities were multiethnic, international centers, and converts took the gospel back to their homeland); and finally it more readily affected the culture (the centers of learning, law, and government were in the cities). As we will see in this chapter, the importance of cities for Christian mission today is, if anything, even greater.

Today, cities are more important than ever before. In 1950, New York and London were the only world cities with metro-area populations of over ten million people. Today, however, there are more than twenty such cities — twelve of which achieved that ranking in the last two decades — with many more to come.¹ All of these new megacities are developing in what was once called the Third World. But why?

In the eighteenth century, a combination of population growth and technology brought rural Europe to its “carrying capacity,” creating a surplus population. Virtually all of the land was owned and developed, and so every family had some members who left the family farm, the countryside, and the small towns to make a living elsewhere. As a result, the great cities of Europe (and, in the nineteenth century, America) swelled in size. Many experts now believe that this type of shift has begun to occur in Africa, in Asia, and to a lesser extent in Latin America, where cities are exploding with people from the rural areas. If the urban-to-rural ratio of these populations stabilizes near 75 percent to 25 percent, as it did in Europe and North America, the next three decades will see over half a billion people move into the cities of Africa and Asia alone — in other

words, one new Rio de Janeiro (ten million people) *every two months*.² Currently, Western cities such as New York City grow at approximately 125,000 people per year, but cities such as Dhaka and Lagos are growing at a rate of more than half a million per year. By most estimates, we have reached the point where over 50 percent of the world population now lives in cities, compared to around 5 percent two centuries ago.³

GLOBALIZATION AND RENAISSANCE

The significance of cities today lies not only in their growing size but also in their growing influence, and this influence is due to the rise of globalization. The technological revolution has led to an unprecedented mobility of people, ideas, and capital. Because of the Internet and other forms of electronic communication, people around the world are more connected than ever before, and Western urban values in particular are spreading everywhere.

What is the effect of this “flattening” of the world due to globalization?⁴ First, globalization *connects cities to the world*. Some people predicted that the rise of technology would end up weakening cities, that it would make agglomeration (a cluster of usually disparate elements) obsolete.⁵ Social networking and communication online, it was argued, would make it unnecessary to pay the high costs of living in the city. But as Edwin Heathcote has written, “Digital networking has not, as was forecast, led to a decline in the city. Rather, it has led to an urbanization of the rest of the planet.”⁶ People, especially young people, want to live in cities. The rise of new forms of technology and mobility has not weakened this desire. Instead, it has dramatically expanded the reach and influence of urban culture. This urbanizing influence now extends far beyond the city limits, affecting even the most rural areas of remote countries. Children in Mexico and Romania are becoming more like young adults in Los Angeles and New York City than the adults in their own locales.

Second, globalization *connects cities to cities*. Not only does globalization connect the rest of the world to urban ideas and culture; it also connects cities to one another, enhancing their power and influence.⁷ World cities are more connected to others around the world than they are to their own nations. The elites of New York, London, and Tokyo not only work for

the same multinational companies, but they also graduate from common educational institutions, take vacations and buy homes in the same places, and share common social and cultural values. They are better able to identify with the urban elites of other nations than with the nonurban citizens of their own countries.

The strong connections among major cities exist not only through the elites, however. Huge, diverse immigrant populations in global cities tie each urban area tightly to scores of other countries. They travel frequently and communicate daily with their homelands. This means, for example, that thousands of residents of New York City are in much closer communication with people in Athens, Manila, Port-au-Prince, Bogota, Hong Kong, and Lagos than they are with the residents of New Jersey and Connecticut. Each global city is a portal to others.

These networked world cities are quickly becoming more economically and culturally powerful than their own national governments. Governments are increasingly losing control of the flow of capital and information and have far less influence than the multinational corporations and international financial, social, and technological networks based in global cities. According to the American journalist Neal Peirce, “Great metropolitan regions — not cities, not states, not even the nation states — are starting to emerge as the world’s most influential players.”⁸

Cities not only grow and mature, but they can also be reborn. Despite the pessimism about Western cities during the late twentieth century, many have regenerated during the 1990s and the first decade of the twenty-first century. During the twenty years from 1970 to 1990, many American cities went into sharp decline. Immigration of blacks from the South to northern cities resulted in white flight, and many poor people were trapped in inner-city ghettos. In the late 1970s and early 1980s protracted recessions diminished tax revenues and drove some cities near or into actual bankruptcy. Meanwhile, urban planning in the mid-twentieth century privileged the suburbs. Whole urban neighborhoods were bulldozed to create expressways that gave suburban residents easy access to center-city jobs. Planners also favored big stores and stadiums with lots of parking, as well as massive housing projects for the poor. All of this led to downtown urban centers that were like ghost towns after dark. The middle class flight

to the suburbs took many jobs, leaving the poor poorer and most neighborhoods riddled with crime. Cities hollowed out into “doughnuts,” with poor nonwhite centers and affluent white suburbs.

However, since 1990, American cities have experienced an amazing renaissance.⁹ During this time, many cities’ population declines have begun to reverse. People began to move back into cities, and center cities began to regenerate at their cores. Why? One of the primary reasons is that during this time the U.S. economy experienced a sustained period of growth, which created a great deal of new wealth and new jobs in knowledge sectors. Second, crime went down in cities for the reasons liberals cite (more jobs) and for the reasons conservatives cite (tougher enforcement). Third, a cultural mood developed (which some call postmodern) embracing eclecticism, the mixture of the old and new, asymmetry, messiness and unmanageability, cultural diversity, and the artistic and organic. All of these are features of city life rather than of suburban culture. Younger adults began to prefer city life and started moving to urban areas in greater numbers. Fourth, changes in immigration law opened the door to an influx of immigrants from non-European nations. Between 1965 and 1970, U.S. immigration doubled. Then, from 1970 to 1990 it doubled again. Most of this immigration wave emptied into America’s cities, renewing and diversifying many neighborhoods. It also completely changed the older, gridlocked, binary black-white dynamic of urban politics into a far more complex, multipolar situation, with many ethnicities and nationalities.

COMEBACK: MINNEAPOLIS AND MILAN

Edward Glaeser cites Minneapolis, Minnesota, and Milan, Italy, as cities that have reinvented themselves. Between 1950 and 1980, Minneapolis lost 30 percent of its population, and its location and climate hardly made it a great candidate for urban renaissance. Its older way of attracting human capital — touting its riverside location — was no longer of much appeal. Yet since 1980, the population of Minneapolis has continued to grow, and it now has the highest per capita income in the upper Midwest. Why? Minneapolis has reinvented itself as a *center of education*. It is home to the

University of Minnesota, and “the city’s most striking economic success stories have some link to that school.”¹⁰ One example is Medtronic, the world’s largest medical technology company.

Milan was a manufacturing giant that was hit by the same forces that led to the decline in the American Rust Belt. Its population fell almost 30 percent from 1970 through 2000. However, Milan reinvented itself, and today three-quarters of its workers are in services, especially finance, but also health and biotechnologies, telecommunications, and, of course, retail and fashion. The population has continued to grow over the past decade.¹¹

As a result, many American cities began to surge. Professionals streamed into center-city neighborhoods, while new ethnic communities developed within older working-class and poor neighborhoods. Sometimes the gentrification process was more destructive and disruptive to the social fabric; in other cases it had a more wholesome effect. The major actors in this renewed upsurge included empty-nester boomers returning to cities, young professionals seeking cities to live and work in, and a wave of immigrants in inner-city neighborhoods and inner suburbs that eventually produced second-generation college graduates who moved into the center city to live and work. These groups joined the gays and artists who have always chosen to live in urban communities.¹²

Edward Glaeser points out that not all cities have succeeded in the past generation — and he points to Detroit, Michigan, and Leipzig, Germany, as examples. But most cities have found the power to reinvent themselves, argues Glaeser, because the essence of what makes a city a city is the bringing of people together to innovate. At one level, this means bringing together the most highly trained and talented people, the “elites.” Yet at another level, it means bringing together the most energetic, ambitious, and risk-taking people from among the poor and middle classes of the world. Cities are cauldrons of reengineering and reinvention, and so it should not surprise us to find that they are always reinventing themselves.

Perhaps the most interesting example of contemporary urban reinvention is what has been called the “consumer city.” The post-World War II years

brought about the rise of suburbanization and the creation of the commuter city. People chose suburban life for its amenities and comforts and commuted into the city only for work and the occasional show. But Vancouver and Los Angeles are two urban areas that reversed the trend. They became *consumer* cities marked by a new phenomenon — the reverse commuter. Increasingly, these and other cities offer residents a quality of life they could not find elsewhere in the region — a dizzying variety of artistic, educational, cultural, and entertainment events and venues, but also (now) safe streets, good schools, and excellent public transportation. Many people now move to London, New York, and Paris and are willing to pay a premium to live in the center of the city, even if their jobs take them out of the core of the city each day.¹³

THE FUTURE OF CITIES

Few people now believe we will see a significant decline in the population growth and importance of global cities, at least in the foreseeable future. The growth trends and culture shifts are on too strong a trajectory. However, the Great Recession and hard economic times in the United States and Europe mean that city governments in these countries are being forced to make deep, painful cuts to their budgets, while the private sector faces the prospect of years of high unemployment. The gaps in social service offerings are likely to widen in many cities. These changes will certainly have an impact on the quality of life in cities.¹⁴

So will Western cities return to the economic and population decline they experienced in the 1970s and 1980s? Several trends are likely to help many cities in the West continue flourishing, at least for the foreseeable future. First, the world will continue to globalize — and globalization is a boon to cities that connect to it. More cities will imitate the biggest and most established cities in the West — New York, Los Angeles, and London — whose strong international connections and influences will help to keep real estate values up and provide a constant source of jobs (regardless of how national economies are faring). As a result, most globalizing cities should be able to remain economically stable.

Second, current urban planning in Western cities has returned to the classic urban form — compact, public transit – oriented, and walkable,

mixed-use development (with residences, businesses, retail outlets, educational and cultural institutions, and entertainment venues situated together). The emphasis will be on developing neighborhood schools, “complete” streets with sidewalks for pedestrians, and lanes for bicyclists. This renewed emphasis on older forms is sometimes called “New Urbanism” or “Smart Growth,” and there are many factors driving this trend. One relates to environmental concerns. Suburban and rural dwellers consume far more energy — electricity, fossil fuels, and other forms — than urban residents.¹⁵ The increasingly urgent search for energy sustainability will continue to press societies to urbanize. Cities, therefore, will remain a very attractive alternative to the suburbs as a social arrangement.

Third, immigration laws have not significantly changed (as of this writing), and so it is likely that the United States will continue to receive immigrants from around the world. Though some trends have seen immigrants moving straight into the suburbs, the structure of city life continues to provide most new immigrants with the essential support resources they need to successfully transition into a new society. Cities today will compete for immigrants, knowing that the urban areas that receive the most immigration will be best positioned for future success.

THERE REALLY IS NO CHOICE

Al Mohler, president of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, read the 2010 Special Report by *Financial Times* titled “The Future of Cities” and responded with strong language:

This much is clear—the cities are where the people are. In the course of less than 300 years, our world will have shifted from one in which only 3 percent of people live in cities, to one in which 80 percent are resident in urban areas.

If the Christian church does not learn new modes of urban ministry, we will find ourselves on the outside looking in. The Gospel of Jesus Christ must call a new generation of

committed Christians into these teeming cities. As these new numbers make clear, there really is no choice.¹⁶

Fourth, one of the greatest fears about cities — that high, life-threatening crime is inevitable in very large urban areas — is fast eroding. Led by New York City, many cities in North America have seen startling drops in crime over the past two decades; and this is one of the main drivers of economic and population growth in cities. The decline in crime is often attributed entirely to better police practices, as Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York recently claimed.¹⁷ But criminologists have shown that policing can only account for part of the decline, and that crime only falls off drastically when a variety of factors converge, many of which are impossible to measure directly.¹⁸ These may include the strengthening of “civil society” — in the flourishing of voluntary associations such as stronger parent-teacher alliances, growth in religious institutions, growth in various nonprofit agencies, and greater public-private cooperatives.¹⁹

Fifth, as far as I can tell, the postmodern mood that leads many young adults to prefer city life to suburban life will continue. This trend is difficult to quantify or fully explain, but the appeal of city life for young people remains quite strong, and the presence of youthful energy and creativity will continue to sustain the growth and strength of cities. According to the *Wall Street Journal* and *The Atlantic*, approximately 32 percent of Americans in the Millennial generation live in cities — and 88 percent of them want to.²⁰

Some of the most troubled cities, such as Detroit, will need to make drastic changes, shrinking their urban footprint and redesigning into smaller municipalities. But this is unlikely to become the norm in the United States. I believe globalization and the current cultural mood will continue to make cities highly desirable destinations for ambitious and innovative people, and this will be a decisive factor in continuing the growth and dominance of urban culture.

Now, more than ever, cities set the course of society and life as a whole, even in areas of the world, such as Europe and North America, where cities are not growing as rapidly.²¹ All current signs lead us to believe that the

world order of the twenty-first century will be global, multicultural, and urban.

THE CHALLENGE OF MINISTRY IN CITIES

The massive growth and influence of cities in our time confront Christian mission with an enormous challenge. The first problem is one of sheer scale and economics. It is critical that we have Christians and churches wherever there are people, but the people of the world are now moving into the great cities of the world many times faster than the church is. Christian communication and ministry must always be translated into every new language and context, but the Christian church is not responding fast enough to keep up with the rapid population growth in cities.

There are five million new people moving into the cities of the developing world every month — roughly the size of the metropolitan areas of Philadelphia or San Francisco. Think of that — how many churches ought there to be in a city the size of Philadelphia? Even if there were one church for every five thousand people — which is five times fewer than the United States average²² — this means we should be planting a thousand urban churches in the world every month.

But the challenge is not just numerical; it is also conceptual and methodological. Our very models for ministry must become increasingly urbanized. U.S. missions agencies are finding that more and more they must send their workers to live and minister in the growing cities. But seldom are these Americans experienced at life or ministry in the city. A couple of years ago, I met with American missionaries who had been sent to one of the fast-growing megacities of China. They told me their mission agency had assumed that the training they needed had to do with learning the language and understanding Chinese culture. But after a while they realized they knew nothing about living in cities. Each member of their team had grown up in small towns in southern and midwestern areas of the United States. They struggled more with urban life than with life in China per se. And they also came to see that the people they were trying to reach were more like people living in Los Angeles and Manhattan than like those in the Chinese countryside. The leader of the team told me, “Only the language training we received was helpful. We were given no training in how to live

in cities and how to reach urban people, and as a result we've been ineffective.”

Urbanization is not only transforming how we in the West do mission overseas; it is also transforming the mission landscape in the West itself. Waves of immigration from the Southern and Eastern Hemispheres are coming to the cities of North America and Europe. Many of these immigrants come from parts of the world where belief in orthodox, supernatural Christianity is on the rise. As a result, thousands of new churches are being planted by non-Westerners in the formerly secular cities of London, Paris, and New York.²³ In fact, most of the largest, well-attended churches in London and Paris are led by Africans, and in New York City we have seen hundreds of new churches started by Christians from Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa. At first, these new Christian churches remain somewhat isolated from the broader society, evangelizing and growing within ethnic enclaves. But as the children of these Christians become educated in national universities and move into the center city, they will begin to wield greater power and influence in areas of finance, media, and culture. Anglo elites have begun inviting many of these young nonwhites into the upper echelons of business and government, not realizing that a large percentage of them are Christians.²⁴

Globalization and urbanization are removing the very distinction between “home” and “foreign” missions (to use, for a moment, the old terminology).²⁵ Consider the example of a church I know in the borough of Queens in New York City. This church has planted three daughter churches — one in New York’s neighboring College Point, one in New York’s neighboring Bronx, and one in the “neighboring” Philippines. They had reached so many Filipino immigrants in their own neighborhood that these new Christians wanted to plant a daughter church among their friends and relatives in their country of origin. So they sent a large group of people out from New York City to plant a new church. This is not an isolated case. Every major city is now a portal for reaching the nations of the world. In other words, one of the very best ways to reach the far parts of the world is to reach your own city!²⁶

Now consider another example. We planted Redeemer Presbyterian Church in the middle of New York City — in central Manhattan. Within a

few years, we had planted daughter churches in Westchester County, New York, and New Jersey (the two principal “bedroom communities” of the city). If we had originally located in any particular suburb, however, we would never have been able in so short a time to plant churches in Manhattan or in the other suburbs. Why not? You can’t reach the city from the suburbs, but you can reach the suburbs from the city. Cities are like a giant heart — drawing people in and then sending them out. Students come to cities to attend school, and then they graduate and move out. Singles meet in the city, get married, and move out to the suburbs when children are born. Immigrants come to the city and live in ethnic enclaves, but as they amass assets and become more established in their new country, they move outward to gain additional space for their growing families. In each case, the movement is from the center outward. As a result, a church that thrives in the city will create a community whose members will spread naturally throughout the adjoining region and into other great cities. In other words, one of the best ways to reach a region and country is to reach your own city!

ONE OF HISTORY’S GREATEST OPPORTUNITIES

Cities can have a major impact on reaching hard-to-reach peoples with the gospel. This is the belief of missionary-theologian Roger Greenway:

It may be helpful to those who harbor misgivings about cities... to reflect on the fact that urbanization as a present fact of life for most of the human family is a reality under the providential control of God. In Acts 17:26 – 27, the apostle Paul observes, “He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him.” Viewed in light of these verses, city growth is not something to be perceived as entirely the work of the devil, but as part of God’s providential plan in history. God’s redemptive purpose

behind urban growth is that “men should seek him and reach out for him”...

Pressed together in metropolises, the races, tribes, and diverse people groups are geographically more accessible than ever before. In some cases the processes of change that new urbanites pass through make them more receptive to the gospel. If this is the case, world urbanization should be viewed in an eschatological as well as missionary framework. God in our time is moving climactically through a variety of social, political, and economic factors to bring earth’s peoples into closer contact with one another, into greater interaction and interdependence, and into earshot of the gospel. By this movement God carries forward his redemptive purposes in history. A sign of our time is the city. Through worldwide migration to the city God may be setting the stage for Christian mission’s greatest and perhaps final hour.²⁷

THE OPPORTUNITY OF MINISTRY IN CITIES

The growth in size and influence of cities today presents the greatest possible challenge for the church. Never before has it been so important to learn how to do effective ministry in cities, and yet, by and large, evangelical Christianity in the United States is still nonurban.

Along with these challenges comes a range of unique opportunities. I see four important groups of people who must be reached to fulfill the mission of the church, and each of them can best be reached in the cities.

1. The younger generation. The prospects for advancement, the climate of constant innovation and change, the coming together of diverse influences and people — all of these appeal to young adults. In the United States and Europe, the young disproportionately want to live in cities, and for the highly ambitious, the numbers are even higher. In a *New York Times* op-ed column, “I Dream of Denver,” David Brooks looks at Pew Research

Center data that shows the sharp difference between younger Americans and older Americans as to their preference for cities:

*Cities remain attractive to the young. Forty-five percent of Americans between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four would like to live in New York City. But cities are profoundly unattractive to people with families and to the elderly. Only 14 percent of Americans thirty-five and older are interested in living in New York City. Only 8 percent of people over sixty-five are drawn to Los Angeles.*²⁸

This means, of course, that if the church in the West remains, for the most part, in the suburbs of Middle America and neglects the great cities, it risks losing an entire generation of American society's leaders.

One of the reasons cities are filled with young adults is that they are also usually filled with students. In university towns it is obvious to the casual observer that students are an important part of the demographic. In large cities, however, there are often enormous numbers of undergraduate and graduate students, but the size and diversity of the urban population make college students less visible. Yet students constitute an extremely important mission field, and urban students have far more local job opportunities available to them after graduation than do those who go to school in "college towns." As a result, college students in cities who are won to the faith are a significant source of future leaders for urban churches.

2. The "cultural elites." The second group is made up of those who have a disproportionate influence on how human life is lived in a society because they exert power in business, publishing, the media, the academy, and the arts. These people live or spend much of their time in city centers. Since cities now influence the culture and values of the world more than ever, the single most effective way for Christians to influence the culture of a nation is to have large numbers of them stay in cities and simply "be the church" there. Also, for all the reasons noted above, ministry that is effective in a world city travels well. Ministry in rural areas of a country may have little transferability to rural areas in other countries. But ministry forms that are effective in one center city are likely to have wide appeal to other center cities, especially with the younger generation.

Some Christians may complain, “We are losing the culture wars.” This comment comes from the fact that relatively small groups living disproportionately in cities exert far more cultural influence than evangelical Christians, who live disproportionately outside of cities. Every time I exit the 42nd Street subway station in Manhattan, I pass Viacom, the parent company of MTV. Few institutions have had a greater cultural impact on an entire generation than MTV. I once read that years of Communist rule had not been able to erode the distinct ethnic identity of the Hungarian minority in Romania. Now, however, a global youth culture is turning Hungarian youth away from their cultural roots. Global consumer youth culture is pumped from Manhattan and Hollywood into the digital devices of kids all around the world. Fifteen-year-olds in rural Mexico are now more “urban” in their sensibilities than their parents are. If churches are to have any influence on the people who create institutions like MTV, they will have to live and minister in the same places where these people live — in the city.

3. Accessible “unreached” people groups. Many people speak about the importance of engaging in mission to the hard-to-reach religious and cultural groups, people who live in remote places or in nations that forbid Christian mission work. But the currents of history are now sweeping many of these formerly unreachable people into cities as rural economies fail to sustain old ways of life.

Millions of these newcomers in the burgeoning cities of the world are more open to the Christian faith than they were in their original context. Most have been uprooted from their familiar, traditional setting and have left behind the thicker kinship and tribal networks they once relied on, and most cities in the developing world often have “next to nothing in working government services.”²⁹ These newcomers need help and support to face the moral, economic, emotional, and spiritual pressures of city life, and this is an opportunity for the church to serve them with supportive community, a new spiritual family, and a liberating gospel message. Immigrants to urban areas have many reasons to begin attending churches, reasons that they did not have in their former, rural settings. “Rich pickings await any groups who can meet these needs of these new urbanites, anyone who can at once feed the body and nourish the soul.”³¹

But there is yet another way in which cities make formerly hard-to-reach peoples accessible. As I noted earlier, the urban mentality is spreading around the world as technology connects young generations to urbanized, global hyperculture. Many young people, even those living in remote places, are becoming globalized semi-Westerners, while their parents remain rooted in traditional ways of thinking. And so ministry and gospel communications that connect well with urban residents are also increasingly relevant and effective with young nonurban dwellers.

MOVING TO THE CITY

In *Two Cities, Two Loves*, James Montgomery Boice considered the 10 percent ratio given in Nehemiah 11:1 for repopulating Jerusalem and suggested that in America, which is less agricultural, a proportional ratio should be even higher. His point was that if more of the nation's Christians deliberately moved into the largest cities and there lived out a life of love, truth, and servanthood, the culture would be fundamentally changed.³⁰

4. The poor. A fourth group of people who can and must be reached in cities is the poor. Some have estimated that one-third of the people representing the new growth in cities in the developing world will live in shantytowns. A great majority of the world's poor live in cities, and there is an important connection between reaching the urban elites and serving the poor of your city. First, an urban church's work among the poor will be a significant mark of its validity. It is one of the "good deeds" that Scripture says will lead pagans to glorify God (Matt 5:16; 1 Pet 2:12). Similarly, once cultural elites are won to Christ, discipling them includes reorienting them to spend their wealth and power on the needs of the poor and the city instead of on themselves. In other words, an urban church does not choose between ministry to the poor and ministry to the professional class. We need the economic and cultural resources of the elites to help the poor, and our commitment to the poor is a testimony to the cultural elites, supporting the validity of our message.

We can be confident that the cities of the world will continue to grow in significance and power. Because of this, they remain just as strategic — if not more so — than they were in the days of Paul and the early church when Christian mission was predominantly urban. I would argue that there is nothing more critical for the evangelical church today than to emphasize and support urban ministry.

The need is great, as is the cost — ministry in city centers is considerably more expensive on a per capita basis than it is away from the urban core. But the church can no longer ignore the profound and irreversible changes occurring in the world today. If Christians want to reach the unreached, we must go to the cities. To reach the rising generations, we must go to the cities. To have any impact for Christ on the creation of culture, we must go to the cities. To serve the poor, we must go to the cities.

Many people who are not naturally comfortable in the city will have to follow the example of Abraham. Abraham was called to leave his familiar culture and become a pilgrim, seeking the city of God (Gen 12:1 – 4; Heb 11:8–10). And while Christians should not deliberately seek difficulty for its own sake, can we not follow the example of the incarnate Christ, who did not live in places where he was comfortable but went where he was useful (Matt 8:20; John 4:34; Rom 15:3)? Can we not face difficulty for *his* sake (cf. Heb 11:26), embracing both the difficulties and the riches of city living?

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. Where have you witnessed some of the things discussed in this chapter (globalization, gentrification, city renaissance, reverse commuting, postmodernism, etc.) in the life of your nearest city? How do they affect life in that city? How do they affect ministry in that city?
2. If our future will be largely an urban culture, what changes should the church be making today to prepare and adapt?
3. One significant trend discussed in this chapter is the influx of Christian immigrant populations and their increasing access to

elite levels of business and society. How do you believe their contributions will shape the future of your ministry?

4. Which of the following city-prone groups do you feel most passionate to reach: the younger generation, the “cultural elites,” accessible “unreached” people groups, or the poor? Is that group present in your setting right now? How is urbanization affecting them? Take a moment to reflect on what it would be like to minister meaningfully to the group you have identified.

CHAPTER 3 — THE CALL TO THE CITY

1. This is true whether one takes a stricter view of population within legal “city limits” (see www.worldatlas.com/citypops.htm) or larger “metropolitan areas” (see www.citypopulation.de/world/Agglomerations.html).
2. See Edward Glaeser, *The Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 1. Other statistics in this paragraph (and the preceding one) are taken from the *Economist* article “The Brown Revolution” (May 9, 2002), www.economist.com/node/1120305 (accessed January 24, 2012).
3. A good, up-to-date source of information on cities is the special report issued by *Financial Times* in early 2010 titled “The Future of Cities,” www.ft.com/cities (accessed January 24, 2012).
4. See Thomas L. Friedman, *The World Is Flat 3.0: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century*, rev. ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
5. See comments on the effects of agglomeration in chapter 14.
 6. Edwin Heathcote, “From Megacity to Metacity,” *Financial Times* (April 6, 2010), www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/e388a076-38d6-11df-9998-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1kNrFC7jH (accessed January 24, 2012).
7. In a photo essay on the website of Foreign Policy, noted urban sociologist Saskia Sassen lists the most influential city-networks in the world: (1) New York–Washington, D.C. – Chicago, (2) Beijing–Hong Kong, (3) Frankfurt–Berlin, (4) Istanbul–Ankara, (5) Brasilia–Rio de Janeiro–Sao Paulo. Each network combines the strengths of finance, government, and the creative arts; see www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/11/28/16_global_cities_to_watch? (accessed January 24, 2012).
8. Neal Peirce, “The ‘Citistates’ Are on the Rise, and the Competition Is Fierce,” *Philadelphia Inquirer* (July 26, 1993), A11, http://articles.philly.com/1993-07-26/news/25975949_1_citistate-

nation-states-world-population (accessed January 24, 2012).

9. The dynamics outlined in this section are especially pronounced in American cities, but they characterize many European cities as well.
0. Glaeser, *Triumph of the City*, 236.
1. *Ibid.*, 237–38.
2. Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City came into existence at the very beginning of this renaissance — in 1989. At that time, moving into the center city to begin a church seemed to be a fool’s errand. The year we moved to New York City, a highly publicized poll revealed that most of the residents of NYC would move away if they could. Indeed, in the 1970s and into the 1980s, nearly everyone was trying to leave cities — well-off and poor, white, black, and immigrant. Those were bad times! Yet, within a few years of our founding, I began to get calls from churches, denominations, and leaders who had begun to notice the renaissance in nearby cities. They realized it was time to plant churches to reach the new residential communities that were growing in cities.
3. *Ibid.*, 131–32, 238–41, 259–60.
4. See Ariella Cohen, “Cities in Crisis,” *Next American City* (Spring 2009), <http://americancity.org/magazine/article/cities-in-crisis/> (accessed January 24, 2012).
5. See David Owen, *Green Metropolis: Why Living Smaller, Living Closer, and Driving Less Are the Keys to Sustainability* (New York: Riverhead, 2009). For a shorter survey, see “Is There Anything Greener than Blacktop?” in Glaeser, *Triumph of the City*, 199.
6. Albert Mohler, “From Megacity to ‘Metacity’ — The Shape of the Future,” *AlbertMohler.com* (April 22, 2010), www.albertmohler.com/2010/04/22/from-megacity-to-metacity-the-shape-of-the-future/ (accessed January 24, 2012).
7. “In the absence of evidence that a reduction or increase in crime can be tied to economic or environmental variables, Mr. Bloomberg said he concluded the success is due to ‘a better police department than ever before.’ ‘We have looked for every kind of relationship and correlation to the weather, the economy, or whatever,’ he said. ‘It’s not there’ (Tamer El-Ghobashy, “Mayor Touts ‘Safest Decade,’” *Wall Street Journal* (December 29, 2011), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204720204577127092122364090.html>.
8. In the *Wall Street Journal* article “Mayor Touts ‘Safest Decade,’” James Alan Fox, a professor of criminology, states that policing is just one of several factors that contribute to precipitous crime reductions. “There’s no one reason why crime falls.” Fox cites, in addition to better policing, an aging population, an increase in incarceration, and the stabilizing of illegal drug markets. But Franklin Zimring, in *The City That Became Safe*, states that New York City’s crime reduction happened despite no significant changes in the population age or incarceration or even illegal drug

use. He shows that many of the reasons for precipitous crime reduction are yet unidentified or hard to measure. He does conclude, however, that the last twenty years proves that crime is not a necessary fact of life in major cities.

9. See Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: From State to Civil Society* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1985).
10. S. Mitra Kalita and Robbie Whelan, “No McMansions for Millennials,” *Wall Street Journal* (January 13, 2011), <http://blogs.wsj.com/developments/2011/01/13/no-mcmansions-for-millennials/>; Jordan Weissmann, “Why Don’t Young Americans Buy Cars?” *The Atlantic* (March 25, 2012), www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2012/03/why-dont-young-americans-buy-cars/255001/#.T3H8uIuSBoQ.twitter (accessed April 5, 2012).
11. See Harvie Conn, *The American City and the Evangelical Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 181–82.
12. We estimate there are 322,000 Christian churches for a United States population of 311 million — a bit more than one church for every 1,000 residents (see the website of the Hartford Institute for Religious Research, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/research/fastfacts/fast_facts.html). The average size of a congregation in the U.S. is 75, which means that if there is one church for every 1,000 residents in a city, 7.5 percent of the population will be going to church. Note that these are median figures; actual numbers vary greatly from region to region.
13. See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); idem, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).
14. These statements are based on numerous examples I have witnessed firsthand in New York City over the past twenty years.
15. See Mark Galli’s interview of Bob Roberts, “Glocal Church Ministry,” *Christianity Today* 51.7 (July 2007), www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/july/30.42.html (accessed January 24, 2012).
16. It should be said that this is not the only way to reach out to the world. There is still a need for Christians in every country to consider the call to relocate to distant lands to accomplish the global mission of the church. To my surprise, in recent years I have seen that domestic urban church planting has almost become romanticized among young evangelicals in the same way overseas missions was romanticized among former generations. We should avoid all rose-colored idealizations. My point is that cities — at home and abroad — are far more important now to the accomplishment of the world mission of the church than they were fifty years ago.

7. Roger Greenway, "World Urbanization and Missiological Education," in *Missiological Education for the Twenty-First Century: The Book, the Circle, and the Sandals*, ed. J. Dudley Woodberry, Charles Van Engen, and Edgar J. Elliston (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1996), 145 – 46.
8. David Brooks, "I Dream of Denver," *New York Times* (February 16, 2009), www.nytimes.com/2009/02/17/opinion/17brooks.html (accessed January 24, 2012).
9. Jenkins, *Next Christendom*, 93.
10. See James Montgomery Boice, *Two Cities, Two Loves: Christian Responsibility in a Crumbling Culture* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), 165 – 77.
11. *Ibid.*, 94.

CHAPTER 4

THE GOSPEL FOR THE CITY

I have made as strenuous a case as I can that the city is one of the highest priorities for Christian life and mission in the twenty-first century. Now I want to press even further. These chapters on City Vision may have given you the idea that I think all Christians should move into cities and serve there. To be clear, this is *not* what I am saying. I believe there must be Christians and churches everywhere there are people. In one sense, there are no “little” places or people.¹ God loves to use unimportant people (1 Cor 1:26 – 31) and unlikely places (John 1:46) to do his work. Jesus wasn’t from Rome or even Jerusalem but was born in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth — perhaps to make this very point. We have been told that now something like 50 percent of the world’s population live in cities — but this means that half the population does *not* live in urban areas, and therefore we must not discourage or devalue gospel ministry in the hundreds of thousands of towns and villages on earth. And ministry in small towns may not change a country, but it surely can have a major impact in its region.²

And yet a thought experiment may be illuminating here. Imagine you are in charge of establishing new churches in two different towns — one has a hundred residents, while the other has ten thousand residents. Imagine also that you have only four church planters. Where would you send them? Regardless of philosophy, I doubt anyone would send two church planters to each town on the premise that all places are equally important in ministry. It simply would not be good stewardship of God’s human resources to send two pastors to a town with only a hundred residents. It is good stewardship, though, to insist that we should increase our attention and emphasis on urban ministry in a day when nonurban areas typically

have more churches than cities and when cities are increasingly exerting more influence on how human life is lived in the world.

So I am not saying that all Christians should pack up and go to live and minister in urban areas. What I *am* saying is that the cities of the world are grievously underserved by the church because, in general, the people of the world are moving into cities faster than churches are. And I am seeking to use all the biblical, sociological, missiological, ecclesial, and rhetorical resources at my disposal to help the church (particularly in the United States) reorient itself to address this deficit.

But the call to the city doesn't end there. Everywhere in the world is more urban than it was ten or twenty years ago. Wherever you live, work, and serve, the city is coming to you. In a sense, every church can and must become a church for its particular city — whether that city is a great metropolis, a university town, or a village. As a result, I believe you can benefit by allowing yourself and your ministry to be intentionally shaped by the realities and patterns of urban life and culture. In order to accomplish this, we must look first at how the dynamics of the city affect our lives and then consider how churches with City Vision will minister in response to these dynamics.

HOW THE CITY WORKS ON US

By many people's reckoning, the "death of distance" should have led to a decline in cities, but it has not. If you can learn things over the Internet, the thinking went, why pay big-city prices for housing? But real learning, communication, and community are far more complex than we may care to acknowledge. A great deal of research has shown that face-to-face contact and learning can never be fully replaced by any other kind.

It is no surprise, then, that research shows us that productivity is significantly higher for companies that locate near the geographic center of "inventive activity" in their industry. Why? Proximity to others working in your field enables the infinite number of interactions, many of them informal, that turns neophytes into experts more quickly and helps experts stimulate each other to new insights. Edward Glaeser observes, "Much of the value of a dense work environment comes from unplanned meetings and

observing the random doings of the people around you. Video conferencing will never give a promising young worker the ability to learn by observing the day-to-day operations of a successful mentor.”³ Other studies reveal that a high percentage of patent applications cited older patents in the same metropolitan region, so “even in our age of information technology, ideas are often geographically localized.”⁴

Urban theorists call this “agglomeration.” Agglomeration refers to the economic and social benefits of physically locating near one another.⁵ It is not surprising, then, that more movies are produced in Los Angeles and Toronto than in Atlanta, because those cities have far larger pools of skilled laborers — writers, directors, actors, technicians — who can make movies happen. It is not surprising that new innovations in financial services come out of Manhattan or new technologies out of Silicon Valley. Why? Agglomeration. The physical clustering of thousands of people who work in the same field naturally generates new ideas and enterprises. But the benefits of agglomeration are not limited to locating near people who, *like* you, work in the same field. There are benefits to be reaped of living near large groups of people who are *unlike* you but who have skills that supplement yours.

A good case study is the world of the arts. “Artistic movements are often highly localized,” even more so than in other fields.⁶ Urban scholar Elizabeth Currid interviewed New York City cultural producers (fashion designers, musicians, and fine artists) and gatekeepers (gallery owners, curators, and editors), as well as owners of clubs and venues frequented by these groups, people in the media and sometimes the academy, the directors of foundations that supported the arts, and prosperous businessmen and women who often acted as patrons.⁷ Art “happened” when complex interactions occurred among people in these diverse sectors of the arts ecosystem — not typically through business meetings in workplaces but through interactions at social gatherings and spontaneous meetings in informal situations. Currid found that the cultural economy depends on having “artistic and cultural producers densely agglomerated,” part of a “clustered production system.”⁸ When these various classes of persons live in geographical proximity, thousands of enterprise-producing, culture-making, face-to-face interactions take place that could not take place

otherwise.⁹ As Ryan Avent puts it, “Cities are a lot like a good group of friends: what you’re doing isn’t nearly as important as the fact that you’re doing it together.”¹⁰

How do the dynamics of agglomeration bear on the real life of the average city Christian? First, *the city uniquely links you with many people like you*. The city’s challenges and opportunities attract the most talented, ambitious, and restless. So whoever you are, in the city you will encounter people who are far more talented and advanced than you are. Because you are placed among so many like-but-extremely-skilled people in your field, you will be consistently challenged to reach down and do your very best. You feel driven and pressed by the intensity of the place to realize every ounce of your potential. Cities draw and gather together human resources, tapping their potential for cultural development as no other human-life structure can. But sin takes this strength feature of the city — its culture-forming intensity — and turns it into a place tainted by deadly hubris, envy, and burnout. This is what sin does. It is a parasitic perversion of the good. The gospel is needed to resist the dark side of this gift.

FACE-TO-FACE

Two researchers at the University of Michigan gave groups of six students each the rules of a game to play as a team. Some groups were allowed ten minutes of face-to-face interaction to discuss strategy before playing. Other groups were given thirty minutes of electronic interaction before playing the game in the exact same way. The groups that only met electronically before the game did far less well. This and other experiments have helped us to see that “face-to face contact leads to more trust, generosity, and cooperation than any other sort of interaction.”¹¹ Indeed, common sense tells us that we work up to the level of those working around us.

Second, *the city uniquely links you with many people unlike you*. The city attracts society’s subcultures and minorities, who can band together for

mutual support. It is inherently merciful to those with less power, creating safe enclaves for singles, the poor, immigrants, and racial minorities. Because you are placed among such inescapable diversity, you will be consistently challenged in your views and beliefs. You will be confronted with creative, new approaches to thought and practice and must either abandon your traditional ways and beliefs or become far more knowledgeable about and committed to them than you were before. Again, sin takes a strength feature of the city — its culture-forming diversity — and turns it into a place that undermines our prior commitments and worldviews. And again, the gospel is needed to resist the dark side of this gift.

How should Christians respond to these ways that the city challenges us? We must respond with the gospel. And how, exactly, does the gospel help us face these challenges with joy rather than fear? Obviously, it is true that we must bring the gospel to the city and hear the gospel while in the city. But we must also recognize how much *the city itself brings the gospel to us*. The city will challenge us to discover the power of the gospel in new ways. We will find people who seem spiritually and morally hopeless to us. We will think, “*Those people will never believe in Christ.*” But a comment such as this is revealing in itself. If salvation is truly by grace, not by virtue and merit, why should we think that *anyone* is less likely than ourselves to be a Christian? Why would anyone’s conversion be any greater miracle than our own? The city may force us to discover that we don’t really believe in sheer grace, that we really believe God mainly saves nice people — people like us.

In cities we will also meet a lot of people who hold to other religions or to no religion who are wiser, kinder, and more thoughtful than we are, because even after growth in grace, many Christians are weaker people than many non-Christians. When this surprises you, reflect on it. If the gospel of grace is true, why would we think that Christians are a better kind of person than non-Christians? These living examples of common grace may begin to show us that even though we intellectually understand the doctrine of justification by faith alone, functionally we continue to assume that salvation is by moral goodness and works.

Early in Redeemer’s ministry, we discovered it was misguided for Christians to feel pity for the city, and it was harmful to think of ourselves as its “savior.” We had to humbly learn from and respect our city and its people. Our relationship with them had to be a consciously reciprocal one. We had to be willing to see God’s common grace in their lives. We had to learn that we needed them to fill out our own understanding of God and his grace, just as they needed us.

I believe many Christians in the West avoid the city because it is filled with “the other.” Because cities are filled with people who are completely unlike us, many Christians find this disorienting. Deep down, we know we don’t *like* these people or don’t feel safe around them. But see how easily we forget the gospel! After all, in the gospel we learn of a God who came and lived among us, became one of us, and loved us to the death, even though we were wholly other from him. The city humbles us, showing us how little we are actually shaped by the story and pattern of the gospel.

The gospel alone can give us the humility (“I have much to learn from the city”), the confidence (“I have much to give to the city”), and the courage (“I have nothing to fear from the city”) to do effective ministry that honors God and blesses others. And in time we will see that, for our own continuing spiritual growth and well-being, we need the city perhaps more than the city needs us.

WHAT SHOULD CHRISTIANS DO ABOUT CITIES?

If this is how the city can change us for the better, what can we do to return the favor?

1. Christians should develop appreciative attitudes toward the city. In obedience to God, Jonah went to the city of Nineveh, but he didn’t love it. In the same way, Christians may come to the city out of a sense of duty to God while being filled with great disdain for the density and diversity of the city. But for ministry in cities to be effective, it is critical that Christians appreciate cities. They should love city life and find it energizing.¹² Why is this so important?

First, because so many who live in and have influence in the city do actually *enjoy* living there. If you try to draw them into your church, they

will quickly pick up on your negative attitude, which can erect a barrier in their willingness to listen to the gospel. Second, if a church consists primarily of people who dislike urban living, those people won't be staying very long. Your church will be plagued with huge turnover (as if turnover and transience aren't enough of a problem already in the city!).

Preaching and teaching that produce a city-positive church must constantly address the common objections to city living, which include beliefs that city life is “less healthy,” too expensive, and an inferior place to raise families. Two additional objections are especially prevalent. One objection I commonly hear is this: “The country is wholesome; the city is corrupting.” Christians should be able to recognize the bad theology (as well as bad history) behind this idea. Liberal humanism of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries viewed human nature as intrinsically good and virtuous, so they concluded that human problems came from wrong socialization. In other words, we become violent and antisocial because of our environment. They taught that human society — especially urban society — teaches us to be selfish and violent. As we have seen, however, the Bible teaches that the city is simply a magnifying glass for the human heart. It brings out whatever is already inside. In the previous chapter, we examined the city's strengths for culture making, as well as its spiritual dangers. But we must remember that the city itself is not to blame for the evil that humans have sinfully brought into it.

Here is another common objection: “The country inspires; faith dies in the city.” While the countryside can indeed inspire, it is quite wrong to say that the urban environment is a harder environment to find and grow in faith. As we noted earlier, many people coming from regions where Christianity is suppressed by the culture hear the gospel for the first time in the great cities where there is more of a “free market” of ideas. Millions of people who are virtually cut off from gospel witness are reachable if they emigrate to cities. Also, many who were raised as nominal Christians come to the cities where they are challenged in new ways and brought to vital, solid faith in the process. I have seen this occur thousands of times during my ministry at Redeemer. The city is, in fact, a spiritual hotbed where people both lose faith and find it in ways that do not happen in more

monolithic, less pluralistic settings. This is, yet again, part of the tension of the city we see addressed in the Bible (see chapter 11).

Sometimes the contrast of the countryside and the city is drawn even more starkly. My colleague at Westminster, Harvie Conn, told me about a man who said to him, “God made the country, and man built the suburbs, but the devil made the city.” The theology behind this statement is dubious to say the least. And theologically, it is not a good idea to think of the countryside as intrinsically more pleasing to God. An urban missionary, Bill Krispin, explains why. Bill once said to me, “The country is where there are more plants than people; the city is where there are more people than plants. And since God loves people much more than plants, he loves the city more than the country.” I think this is solid theological logic. The apex of creation is, after all, the making of male and female in the image of God (Gen 1:26 – 27). Therefore, cities, which are filled with people, are absolutely crammed full of what God considers the most beautiful sight in his creation. As we have noted before, cities have more “image of God” per square inch than anywhere else, and so we must not idealize the country as somehow a more spiritual place than the city. Even those (like Wendell Berry) who lift up the virtues of rural living outline a form of human community just as achievable in cities as in small towns.

WENDELL BERRY AND THE “AGRARIAN MIND”

Many people point to the essayist Wendell Berry as a leading light of modern agrarians who seem to make a strong case for rural living over urban living. However, while Berry does laud the life of the farm and the small town, he defines the “agrarian mind” as essentially that which values the *local*:

The agrarian mind is... local. It must know on intimate terms the local plants and animals and local soils; it must know local possibilities and impossibilities, opportunities and hazards. It depends and insists on knowing very particular local histories and biographies.¹³

He goes on to speak of the agrarian mind as (1) valuing work not for the money it can command but for what it provides for human flourishing; (2) valuing work that makes things that are concrete, durable, and useful; (3) embracing humility and having little need for growth and wealth; and (4) holding a commitment to a particular place for a lifetime and to conducting one's work, recreation, family life in the same place and within a web of thick, long-term, local personal relationships. Berry contrasts this with an "industrial mind" characterized by pride and a lack of respect and gratitude for nature and limitations and manifesting itself in exploitation and greed.

What this means, I believe, is that a person with an "agrarian" mind can live in a city very well. It is illuminating to compare the seminal work of Jane Jacobs (*The Death and Life of the Great American Cities*) with Berry's work. Jacobs was as committed as Berry to the importance of neighborhood — of local economies in which members of the neighborhood knew each other, had regular dealings with each other, and identified their own interests with the interests of their neighbors.

How can you as a church or an individual live out this value if you are not located near a metropolitan area? I believe the best strategy is to include urban ministry in your global missions portfolio. This may mean supporting individual missionaries who serve in cities; an even more effective strategy is to support church-planting ministries in global cities.¹⁵ Another promising trend is the creation of metro-wide partnerships of churches and other agencies to support the holistic work of spreading the gospel throughout the city.

2. Christians should become a dynamic counterculture where they live. It will not be enough for Christians to simply live as individuals in the city, however. They must live as a particular kind of community. In the Bible's tale of two cities, man's city is built on the principle of personal aggrandizement (Gen 11:1 – 4), while "the city of our God... is beautiful in its loftiness, the joy of the whole earth" (Ps 48:1–2). In other words, the

urban society God wants is based on *service*, not selfishness. Its purpose is to spread joy from its cultural riches to the whole world. Christians are called to be an *alternate city* within every earthly city, an *alternate human culture* within every human culture — to show how sex, money, and power can be used in nondestructive ways; to show how classes and races that cannot get along outside of Christ can get along in him; and to show how it is possible to cultivate by using the tools of art, education, government, and business to bring hope to people rather than despair or cynicism.

Someone may ask, “Can’t Christians be an alternate city out in the suburbs?” Absolutely! This is one of our universal callings as Christians. Yet again, though, the earthly city magnifies the effect of this alternate city and its unique forms of ministry. In racially homogeneous places, it is harder to show in pragmatic ways how the gospel uniquely undermines racial barriers (see Eph 2:11–22). In places where few artists live, it is pragmatically harder to show the gospel’s unique effect on art. In economically homogeneous places, physically removed from the human poverty that is so pervasive in the world, it is pragmatically harder for Christians to realize how much money they are spending on themselves. What is possible in the suburbs and rural towns comes into sharper focus in the city. The city illustrates in vivid detail the unique community life that is produced as the fruit of the gospel.

3. Christians should be a community radically committed to the good of their city as a whole. It is not enough for Christians to form a culture that merely “counters” the values of the city. We must also commit, with all the resources of our faith and life, to serve sacrificially the good of the whole city, and especially the poor.

It is especially important that Christians not be seduced by the mind-set of the “consumer city” — the city as adult playground. Cities attract young adults with a dizzying variety of amenities and diversions that no suburb or small town can reproduce. Even when holding constant factors such as income, education, marital status, and age, city residents are far more likely to go to a concert, visit a museum, go to the movies, or stop into a local pub than people outside of urban areas.¹⁶ On top of this, urban residents, more than their country cousins, tend to take an unmistakable pride in sophistication and hipness. Christians must not be tempted to come to the

city (or at least not to remain in the city) for these motivations. Christians indeed can be enriched by the particular joys of urban life, but ultimately they live in cities to serve.

Jacobs called this “eyes on the street”— people who felt ownership of the environment, were committed to the common welfare, and watched the street, willing to take action if necessary. Both urban neighborhoods and small towns have mixed-land use in which residences, shops, businesses, schools, and so forth were all within walking distance of each other, which leads to more human-scale, local economy.

Jacobs’s book was a polemic against the “suburbanization” of the city occurring in the 1960s by planners who were destroying local neighborhoods in order to build large-scale, homogeneous areas of retail, business offices, or residences. The New Urbanism today revels in the very small-scale, walkable, mixed-use communities that Jacobs describes. Political theorist Mark Mitchell writes these interesting words:

Ultimately, healthy communities will only be realized when individuals commit to a particular place and to particular neighbors in the long-term work of making a place, of recognizing and enjoying the responsibilities and pleasures of membership in a local community. These good things are not the unique provenance of agrarian or rural settings. They can and have been achieved in urban and town settings.¹⁴

Christians must work for the peace, security, justice, and prosperity of their neighbors, loving them in word and deed, whether or not they believe the same things we believe. In Jeremiah 29:7, God calls the Jews not just to live in the city but to love it and work for its shalom — its economic, social, and spiritual flourishing. Christians are, indeed, citizens of God’s heavenly city, but *these citizens are always the best possible citizens of their earthly*

city. They walk in the steps of the One who laid down his life for his opponents.

Christians in cities must become a counterculture for the common good. They must be radically different from the surrounding city, yet radically committed to its benefit. They must minister to the city out of their distinctive Christian beliefs and identity. We see this balance demonstrated when we examine the early Christian understanding of citizenship. Paul used his Roman citizenship as leverage and defense in the service of his wider missional aims (Acts 16:37–38; 22:25 – 29; cf. 21:39; 23:27). He tells the Ephesians that because of the work of the gospel, “You are no longer foreigners and aliens, but *fellow citizens with God’s people* and *members of God’s household*, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (Eph 2:19 – 20, emphasis mine).

And to the church in Philippi, Paul writes, “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body” (Phil 3:20 – 21). Though Roman citizenship was a beneficial badge and indeed carried valuable social status, Paul is clear that Christians are, first and foremost, citizens of heaven.

Joseph presents an interesting Old Testament demonstration of this tension. When he is made prince of the land (Gen 41:39 – 40), he pursues the wealth and good of *Egypt*, just as he had previously done in prison and in Potiphar’s house. Through his pursuit of the good of the city, salvation comes to the people of God. This story is especially striking because God puts Joseph in the position to save *the city* from hunger, not just the people of God.

In the end, Christians live not to increase the prosperity of our own tribe and group through power plays and coercion but to serve the good of all the people of the city (regardless of what beliefs others hold). While secularism tends to make people individualistic, and traditional religiosity tends to make people tribal, the gospel should destroy the natural selfishness of the human heart and lead Christians to sacrificial service that benefits the whole city. If Christians seek power and influence, they will arouse fear and

hostility. If instead they pursue love and seek to serve, they will be granted a great deal of influence by their neighbors, a free gift given to trusted and trustworthy people.

Christians should seek to live in the city, not to *use* the city to build great churches, but to use the resources of the church to seek a great, flourishing city. We refer to this as a “city growth” model of ministry rather than a strictly “church growth” model. It is the ministry posture that arises out of a Center Church theological vision.

SEVEN FEATURES OF A CHURCH FOR THE CITY

It is infinitely easier to *talk* about living out this posture “on the ground” in our cities than to actually do it. The challenge is to establish churches and other ministries that effectively engage the realities of the cities of the world. The majority of evangelical Protestants who presently control the United States mission apparatus are typically white and nonurban in background. They neither understand nor in most cases enjoy urban life. As I have been arguing, many of the prevailing ministry methods are forged outside of urban areas and then simply imported, with little thought given to the unnecessary barriers this practice erects between urban dwellers and the gospel. Consequently, when ministers go into a city, they often find it especially hard to evangelize and win urban people — and equally difficult to disciple converts and prepare Christians for life in a pluralistic, secular, culturally engaged setting. Just as the Bible needs to be translated into its readers’ vernacular, so the gospel needs to be embodied and communicated in ways that are understandable to the residents of a city.

I believe churches that minister in ways that are indigenous and honoring to a city — whatever its size — exhibit seven vital features:

1. respect for urban sensibility
2. unusual sensitivity to cultural differences
3. commitment to neighborhood and justice
4. integration of faith and work
5. bias for complex evangelism

6. preaching that both attracts and challenges urban people
7. commitment to artistry and creativity

We'll unpack each of these characteristics in more detail here, as well as note where several of them are covered more fully in later chapters of the book.

1. Respect for urban sensibility. Our culture is largely invisible to us, which is why it is revelatory to leave one's society and live in a very different culture for a while. This experience enables us to see how much of our thought and behavior is not based on universal common sense but on a particular cultural practice. And it is often easier to see the big cultural differences than the small ones. Christians who move to cities within their own country (or even region) often underestimate the importance of the small cultural differences they have with urbanites. They speak and act in ways that are out of step with urban sensibilities, and if this is pointed out to them, they despise the criticism as snobbishness.

Most American evangelical churches are middle class in their corporate culture. That is, they value privacy, safety, homogeneity, sentimentality, space, order, and control. In contrast, the city is filled with ironic, edgy, diversity-loving people who have a high tolerance for ambiguity and disorder. On the whole, they value intensity and access more than comfort and control. Center-city people appreciate sophistication in communication content and mode, and yet they eschew what they consider slickness, hype, and excessive polish. Being able to strike these nuanced balances cannot be a matter of performance. Christian leaders and ministers must genuinely belong to the culture so they begin to intuitively understand it.

THE TRUE CHURCH

We must understand that the seven characteristics of a church that is effective in urban engagement in no way replaces the more foundational question of what, biblically speaking, constitutes a true church.¹⁷ The marks of a true church — what it does — are the Word rightly believed and declared, and the sacraments and discipline rightly administered. The purposes of the church — what

it aims to accomplish with these ministries — are the worship of God, the edification of the saints, and the witness to the world. All true churches have these characteristics.

Yet a church may have all these biblical marks and qualities, and its ministry could be wholly *unfruitful* in the city. This is true for the same reason that every preacher who believes the Word rightly and expounds it faithfully will nonetheless preach sermons that are quite useful for a certain kind of hearer and yet confusing and even unhelpful for another. For more on this dynamic, see the Introduction and part 3 (“Gospel Contextualization”).

Center-city culture in particular is filled with well-informed, verbal, creative, and assertive people who do not respond well to authoritative pronouncements. They appreciate thoughtful presentations that are well argued and provide opportunities for communication and feedback. If a church’s ministers are unable to function in an urban culture, choosing instead to create a “missionary compound” within the city, they will soon discover they cannot reach out, convert, or incorporate the people who live in their neighborhoods.

2. Unusual sensitivity to cultural differences.

Effective leaders in urban ministry are acutely aware of the different people groups within their area. Because cities are dense and diverse, they are always culturally complex. This means not only that different races and socioeconomic classes are in closer physical proximity than in other settings, but that other factors, such as ethnicity, age, vocation, and religion, create a matrix of subcultures. In New York City, for example, older downtown artists (over the age of fifty) are significantly different from younger artists. The Jewish community in New York City is vast and variegated. The cultural differences among African-Americans, Africans, and Afro-Caribbeans are marked, even as they share a broad sense of identity over against white culture. Some groups clash more with particular groups than others (e.g., African-Americans and Koreans in some cities). The gay community is divided between those who want to be more

integrated into mainstream culture and those who do not. Asians talk about being “1.0, 1.5, or second generation.”

Fruitful urban ministers must first notice these differences and avoid thinking they are inconsequential. Then they must seek to understand these different people respectfully and navigate accordingly in communication and ministry without unnecessarily offending others. In fact, urban ministers should constantly surprise others with how well they understand other cultures. If you are an Anglo man, for example, you should occasionally hear something like, “I didn’t think a white man would know about that.”

Those raised in culturally homogeneous areas who move to a city soon come to realize how many of their attitudes and habits — which they thought of as simply universal common sense — were deeply tied to their race and class. For instance, Anglo-Americans don’t see themselves as making decisions, expressing emotions, handling conflict, scheduling time and events, and communicating in a “white” way — they just think they are doing things the way everybody knows things ought to be done. In an urban setting, people typically become more sensitive to these blind spots. Why? Because they are acquainted with the aspirations, fears, passions, and patterns of several different groups of people through involvement with friends, neighbors, and colleagues who come from these groups. They have personally experienced how members of different ethnic or even vocational groups use an identical word or phrase to mean different things.

No church can be all things to all people. There is no culturally neutral way of doing ministry. The urban church will have to choose practices that reflect the values of *some* cultural group, and in so doing it will communicate in ways that different cultural groups will see and hear differently. As soon as it chooses a language to preach in, or the music it will sing, it is making it easier for some people to participate and more difficult for others.

Nevertheless, the ever-present challenge is to work to make urban ministry as broadly appealing as possible and as inclusive of different cultures as possible. One of the ways to do this is to have a racially diverse set of leaders “up front.” When we see someone like ourselves speaking or leading a meeting, we feel welcomed in a hard-to-define way. Another way

is to listen long and hard to people in our congregation who feel underrepresented by the way our church does ministry. In the end, we must accept the fact that urban churches will experience recurring complaints of racial insensitivity. Urban ministers live with the constant sense that they are failing to embrace as many kinds of people as they should. But they willingly and gladly embrace the challenge of building racial and cultural diversity in their churches and see these inevitable criticisms as simply one of the necessary costs of urban ministry.

3. Commitment to neighborhood and justice.

Urban neighborhoods are highly complex. Even gentrified neighborhoods, full of professionals, may actually be “bipolar.” That is, alongside the well-off residents in their expensive apartments, private schools, and various community associations and clubs is often a “shadow neighborhood” filled with many who live in poverty, attend struggling schools, and reside in government housing.

Urban ministers learn how to exegete their neighborhoods to grasp their sociological complexity. They are obsessed with studying and learning about their local communities. (Academic training in urban ethnography, urban demographics, and urban planning can be a great help to a church’s lay leaders and staff members.) But faithful churches do not exegete their neighborhoods simply to target people groups, although evangelistic outreach is one of the goals. They are looking for ways to strengthen the health of their neighborhoods, making them safer and more humane places for people to live. This is a way to seek the welfare of the city, in the spirit of Jeremiah 29.

Urban churches train their members to be neighbors in the city, not just consumers. As we have seen, cities attract young professionals by providing something of a “theme park” with thousands of entertainment and cultural options, and many new urban residents tend to view the city as simply a place where they can have fun, develop a résumé, and make friends who will be of help to them in the future. They plan to do this for a few years and then leave. In other words, they are *using* the city rather than living in it as neighbors (as Jesus defines the term in the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37).

In the middle years of the twentieth century, Jane Jacobs wrote the classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Jacobs's great contribution came in demonstrating the importance of street life for civil society. She observed how foot traffic and street life and a mixture of residences and businesses (viewed negatively by suburban zoners and even many urban planners at the time) were critical for economic vitality, for safety, for healthy human relationships, and for a strong social fabric. Jacobs was a major opponent of large-scale urban projects in the mid-twentieth century, the very projects that eventually ruined neighborhoods and the street life she had promoted.

Jacobs writes the following:

Looking at city neighborhoods as organs of self-government, I can see evidence that only three kinds of neighborhoods are useful: (1) the city as a whole; (2) street neighborhoods; and (3) districts of large, subcity size (composed of 100,000 people or more in the case of the largest cities).

Each of these kinds of neighborhoods has different functions, but the three supplement each other in complex fashion.¹⁸

Jacobs explains how each of these is indeed a neighborhood and how each requires the participation of all urban residents to keep the city healthy. In other words, you must know your literal neighbors (your street neighborhood) and have some familiarity with the blocks around your residence (your district). And yet this in itself is not enough. "Ward politics" — in which one neighborhood pits its own good against the good of the other parts of the city — is unwholesome and unhealthy. So it is important for Christians and Christian ministries to find ways to be neighbors to the whole city, not just to their immediate street neighborhood. Failing to engage in the interests of the entire city often results in a lack of involvement in helping the poorest residents of the city. It is equally important that a church not minister just to the whole city while ignoring its local neighborhood. If this happens, a church can become a commuter church that no longer knows how to reach the kind of people who live in their immediate vicinity.

Urban churches, then, should be known in their community as a group of people who are committed to the good of all their neighbors, near and far. It

takes this type of holistic commitment from all residents and institutions to maintain a good quality of life in the city, and a church that is not engaged in this manner will (rightly) be perceived by the city as tribal.

4. Integration of faith and work. Traditional evangelical churches tend to emphasize personal piety and rarely help believers understand how to maintain and apply their Christian beliefs and practice in the worlds of the arts, business, scholarship, and government. Many churches do not know how to disciple members without essentially pulling them out of their vocations and inviting them to become heavily involved in church activities. In other words, Christian discipleship is interpreted as consisting largely of activities done in the evening or on the weekend.

RENTERS AND NEIGHBORHOOD

One “occupational hazard” of urban church planting is having a new church rent its worship space and therefore only *corporately* reside in a particular neighborhood for the few hours during which they rent the space. Often this means, on the one hand, that the neighbors have no idea there is a church meeting in that space; on the other hand, church members feel very little responsibility to “love their neighbors.” It is important for churches that rent space to own their neighborhood. Church leaders should therefore be intentional about inhabiting their neighborhood. They should go to local community boards and neighborhood association meetings, as well as contact local government officials and representatives to discover how they can best serve the needs of the neighborhood. This has not been a strength of Redeemer Church in the past, and we are working to change this now that we have moved into our first owned space on the Upper West Side of Manhattan.

Many vocations of city dwellers — fashion and the media, the arts and technology, business and finance, politics and public policy — demand great amounts of time and energy. These are typically not forty-hour-a-week jobs. They are jobs that dominate a person’s life and thinking, and urban

Christians are confronted with ethical and theological issues every day in the workplace. Preaching and ministry in urban churches must therefore help congregants form networks of believers within their vocational field and assist them in working through the theological, ethical, and practical issues they face in their work.

In addition to the practical issues of how to do their individual work, urban Christians need a broader vision of how Christianity engages and influences culture. As we have discussed, cities are culture-forming incubators, and believers in such places have a significant need for guidance on how Christian faith should express itself in public life. For more on this subject, see part 5 (Cultural Engagement) and part 7 (Integrative Ministry).

5. Bias for complex evangelism. Two kinds of urban churches can grow without evangelism. The first is the ethnic/immigrant church. While many ethnic churches are evangelistic, it is possible for them to grow without conversions, as new immigrants are always looking for connections to their own people in the city. Ethnic churches therefore become informal “community centers” for people of the same race and subculture — and they can grow simply by gathering new immigrants who want to be part of the fellowship. Second, churches in Western center cities can grow without evangelism by meeting the needs of one particular “immigrant subculture” — evangelical Christians — through preaching, music, children’s programs, and so forth. In the past, in cities outside of the southern and midwestern United States, there simply was no constituency of “church shoppers” to attract. However, during the urban renaissance of the last fifteen years, this situation has changed, and cities have become desirable destinations for young adults from all over the country. Redeemer Presbyterian Church’s experience is a good way to understand this phenomenon.

Redeemer was begun in Manhattan at the end of the 1980s, during the end of an era of urban decline. Crime was high and the city was losing population, and there were few or no Christians moving into New York City from the rest of the country. During the first several years of Redeemer’s existence, it grew through aggressive but winsome evangelism. An evangelistic consciousness permeated the young congregation, and several

hundred people came to faith out of nonbelief and nonchurched backgrounds over the first five years.

By the mid-1990s, the urban regeneration had begun, and we noticed that young adults from Christian backgrounds were moving to the cities. By the end of the decade, we found that we could (and did) grow substantially by drawing these folks in and helping them live out their Christian lives in service to the city. This is, of course, a very good and important thing, but it can also mask a lack of evangelism, and in the end, nonevangelistic church growth can't help reach the city in the most profound way. Recognizing this danger, our church has recommitted itself to reigniting our ethos of evangelism.

Not only must an urban church be committed to evangelism; it must be committed to the *complexity* of urban evangelism. There is no "one size fits all" method or message that can be used with all urban residents. For example, it is impossible for a Christian minister in London to share the gospel in exactly the same way with an atheist native Scot or a Muslim from Pakistan — yet they may both be the minister's literal neighbors. Urban evangelism requires immersion in the various cultures' greatest hopes, fears, views, and objections to Christianity. It requires a creative host of different means and venues, and it takes great courage.

6. Preaching that both attracts and challenges urban people. Perhaps the greatest challenge for preachers in urban contexts is the fact that many secular and nonbelieving people may be in the audience. Of course, urban congregations can be as ingrown as any others, but certain dynamics of urban life can more readily make city church gatherings "spiritually mixed" and filled with nonbelievers. Urban centers have higher percentages of single people, and it is far easier for a single Christian to get a single, non-Christian friend to come to a church gathering than it is for a Christian family to get an entire non-Christian family to come. Singles make unilateral decisions (without having to consult others), tend to spend more time out of their homes, and are more open to new experiences. Also, cities are not "car cultures"; they are pedestrian cultures, and it is not unusual for people to simply walk off the street into church out of curiosity. Finally, cities are places where people come to "make it," are often separated from extended families, and are under a great deal of stress. As a result, urban

people are often in a spiritual search mode and can be hungry for human connection and a sense of belonging.

The challenge for the urban preacher is to preach in a way that edifies believers and engages and evangelized nonbelievers at the same time. We will speak more about evangelistic worship in chapter 23. But here are some pointers.

First, be sure to preach sermons that ground moral exhortation in Christ and his work (see the section in chapter 6 titled “Preaching for Renewal”). Show how we live as we should only if we believe in and apply Christ’s work of salvation as we should. In this way nonbelievers hear the gospel each week, yet believers have their issues and problems addressed as well.

Second, be very careful to think about your audience’s premises. Don’t assume, for example, that everyone listening trusts the Bible. So when you make a point from the Bible, it will help to show that some other trusted authority (such as empirical science) agrees with the Bible. Use it to promote trust of the Bible, saying something like, “See, the Bible was telling us centuries ago what science now confirms.” That will help convince your hearers of that point so you can move on. By the end of the sermon, of course, you will be appealing only to God’s Word, but in the early stages of the sermon you invite nonbelievers along by showing respect for their doubts about the Bible’s reliability.

Third, do “apologetic sidebars.” Try to devote one of the three or four sermon points mainly to the doubts and concerns of nonbelievers. Keep in your head a list of the ten or so biggest objections people have to Christianity. More often than not, the particular Scripture text has some way to address them. Always treat people’s typical doubts about Christianity with respect. Jude reminds us to “be merciful to those who doubt” (Jude 22). Never give the impression that “all intelligent people think like I do.” Don’t hesitate to say, “I know this Christian doctrine may sound outrageous, but would you consider this...?”

Fourth, address different groups directly, showing that you know they are there, as though you are dialoguing with them: “If you are committed to Christ, you may be thinking this — but the text answers that fear,” or “If you are not a Christian or not sure what you believe, then you surely must

think this is narrow-minded — but the text says this, which speaks to this very issue.”

Fifth, consider demeanor. The young secularists of New York City are extremely sensitive to anything that smacks of artifice to them. Anything that is too polished, too controlled, too canned will seem like salesmanship. They will be turned off if they hear a preacher use noninclusive gender language, make cynical remarks about other religions, adopt a tone of voice they consider forced or inauthentic, or use insider evangelical tribal jargon. In particular, they will feel “beaten up” if a pastor yells at them. The kind of preaching that sounds passionate in the heartland may sound like a dangerous rant in certain subcultures in the city.

Sixth, show a deep acquaintance with the same books, magazines, blogs, movies, and plays — as well as the daily life experiences — that your audience knows. Mention them and interpret them in light of Scripture. But be sure to read and experience urban life across a spectrum of opinion. There is nothing more truly urban than showing you know, appreciate, and digest a great diversity of human opinion. During my first years in New York, I regularly read *The New Yorker* (sophisticated secular), *The Atlantic* (eclectic), *The Nation* (older, left-wing secular), *The Weekly Standard* (conservative but erudite), *The New Republic* (eclectic and erudite), *Utne Reader* (New Age alternative), *Wired* (Silicon Valley libertarian), *First Things* (conservative Catholic). As I read, I imagine dialogues about Christianity with the writers. I almost never read a magazine without getting a scrap of a preaching idea.

7. Commitment to artistry and creativity. According to the United States census, between 1970 and 1990 the number of people describing themselves as “artist” more than doubled, from 737,000 to 1.7 million. Since 1990, the number of artists continued to grow another 16 percent to nearly two million. Professional artists live disproportionately in major urban areas, and so the arts are held in high regard in the city, while in nonurban areas little direct attention is typically given to them. Urban churches must be aware of this. First, they should have high standards for artistic skill in their worship and ministries. If you do not have such standards, your church will feel culturally remote to the average urban

dweller who is surrounded by artistic excellence even on the streets where talented artists sing and perform.

Second, city churches should think of artists not simply as persons with skills to use. They must connect to them as worshipers and hearers, communicating that they are valued for both their work and their presence in the community. This can be done in a variety of ways. One way includes being sensitive to your own region's or city's particular art history (e.g., Nashville is a music center; New England and the Midwest have many writers; New Mexico is a center for visual artists). Take time to listen to the artists and musicians in your church to understand something about the nature of the local artistic community and how the creative process works. Do your best to work with local artists and musicians rather than flying in your favorite artists long-distance for concerts or shows. When you make use of artists' gifts, take their advice on how the music and the art should be done; don't simply give orders to them.

God has given us the city for his purposes, and even though sin has harmed it, we should use the resources of the gospel to repair broken cities. Jesus himself went to the city and was crucified "outside the city gate" (Heb 13:12), a biblical metaphor for forsakenness. By his grace, Jesus lost the city-that-was, so we could become citizens of the city-to-come (Heb 11:10; 12:22), making us salt and light in the city-that-is (Matt 5:13–16).

So we urge *all* the people of God to recognize and embrace the strategic intensity of cities — and therefore to respond to the urgent call to be *in the city* and *for the city* from every coordinate on the globe. City Vision recognizes God's creational intentions for cities and calls the people of God to be the city of God within the city of man.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. If you are not located in a city, how might City Vision shape and improve the fruitfulness of your current ministry?
2. How is agglomeration evident around you? Which types of trades, skills, inventors, or culture makers are concentrated most

highly in your area? In what ways can your ministry seek face-to-face opportunities to minister to and through this population — that is, to become an “agglomerizing” church?

3. Keller writes, “The city itself brings the gospel to us. The city will challenge us to discover the power of the gospel in new ways.” How does this chapter suggest this happens? How have you experienced this?
4. Which of the seven features of a church for the city does your church currently exhibit? How might those outside your community answer this question?

CHAPTER 4 — THE GOSPEL FOR THE CITY

1. I am thinking of a sermon by Francis A. Schaeffer titled “No Little People, No Little Places,” in *No Little People: Sixteen Sermons for the Twentieth Century* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1974); see www.sbts.edu/resources/files/2010/02/sbjt_062_schaeffer.pdf (accessed January 24, 2012).
2. Thanks to Richard Coekin for convincingly emphasizing this point to me.
3. *Ibid.*, 36.
4. *Ibid.*
5. For a thorough but highly technical study of this subject, see Edward L. Glaeser, *Cities, Agglomeration, and Spatial Equilibrium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).
6. *Ibid.*, 1.
7. See Elizabeth Currid, “How Art and Culture Happen in New York: Implications for Urban Economic Development,” *Journal of the American Planning Association* 73:4 (Autumn 2007): 454–67.
8. *Ibid.*, 454.
9. *Ibid.*
0. Ryan Avent, *The Gated City. How America Made Its Most Productive Places Ever Less Accessible* (Amazon Digital Services. Kindle Single, 2011)
1. Edward Glaeser, *The Triumph of the City: How Our Greatest Invention Makes Us Richer, Smarter, Greener, Healthier, and Happier* (New York: Penguin, 2011), 35.
2. Some have pointed out to me that when Jonah was rebuked for not “loving the city” as God did (Jonah 4:10–11), he was being challenged to love the *people* of the city — not “city living” or the

city as social structure. And this certainly is true for the Jonah text. Nevertheless, as we have shown in the chapter “The Tension of the City,” the Bible *does* see the city as a positive social arrangement, and many Bible scholars (e.g., Henri Blocher, Meredith Kline) even argue that the Bible sees the city as God’s creation. Speaking practically, Christians who want to be fruitful in cities must have at least a positive appreciation for the strengths and advantages of city life as outlined in this part of the book.

3. Wendell Berry, *Citizenship Papers* (Berkeley, Calif.: Counterpoint, 2004), 116.
4. Mark T. Mitchell, “Wendell Berry and the New Urbanism: Agrarian Remedies, Urban Prospects,” *Front Porch Republic* (March 20, 2011), www.frontporchrepublic.com/2011/03/wendell-berrys-new-urbanism-agrarian-remedies-urban-prospects/ (accessed January 24, 2012).
5. Full disclosure: global city church planting is one of my greatest passions. It is the primary focus of our affiliated global missions agency, Redeemer City to City (visit www.redeemercitycity.com).
6. Glaeser, *Triumph of the City*, 126. See also p. 259, where Glaeser carefully critiques the view of Richard Florida, namely, that cities flourish when they attract the young and hip, artists, the avant-garde, and people who have alternative lifestyles. Glaeser believes that cities should instead concentrate on “core public services” — safe streets, good schools, and so on.
7. See Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995).
8. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961), 117.

Appendix

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

Introduction

CENTER CHURCH THEOLOGICAL VISION

SUCCESSFUL, FAITHFUL, OR FRUITFUL?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE “SECRET” OF REDEEMER’S FRUITFULNESS

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

Those conferences called for me to summarize what we were doing that was bearing fruit in the city. The talks I gave were based on the syllabi I had developed at Westminster to answer the question, “What makes gospel ministry faithful and fruitful?” But those lectures had been more theoretical. Now I was being asked for principles of ministry grounded in our everyday experience of gospel work in Manhattan.

But the process of identifying “principles of ministry” was not easy for me because what I wanted to say to observers didn’t fit very well into existing categories.

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

Another category of book operates at the opposite end of the spectrum. These books do not spend much time laying biblical theological foundations, though virtually all of them cite biblical passages. Instead, they are practical “how-to” books that describe specific mind-sets, programs, and ways to do church. This genre of book exploded onto the scene during the church growth movement of the 1970s and 1980s through the writing of authors such as C. Peter Wagner and Robert Schuller. A second generation of books in a similar vein appeared with personal accounts of successful churches, authored by senior pastors, distilling practical principles for others to use. A third generation of practical church books began more than ten years ago. These are volumes that directly criticize the church growth “how-to” books. Nevertheless, they also consist largely of case studies and pictures of what a good church looks like on the ground, with practical advice on how to organize and conduct ministry. Again, from these volumes I almost always profited, coming away from each book with at least one good idea I could use. But by and large, I found the books less helpful than I hoped they would be. Implicitly or explicitly, they made near-absolutes out of techniques and models that had worked in a certain place at a certain time. I was fairly certain that many of these methods would not work in New York and were not as universally applicable as the authors implied. In

particular, church leaders outside of the United States found these books irritating because the authors assumed that what worked in a suburb of a U.S. city would work almost anywhere.

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

So, for example, Redeemer has had classical music in its morning services and jazz music in its evening services. This is unusual, so some have asked, “Is this how you reach urban people? Is this a key?” My immediate response is, “No, it isn’t. Not only is it likely you will come to different conclusions about music in different world cities, but there have been and are other effective ways to use music in worship that are effective in New York City.” Others have concluded that the type of preaching at Redeemer has been the key. They noticed my style of quoting liberally from literary and secular media sources and conclude that this is the way to reach large numbers of urban people. But it is possible to adopt this style to little effect. Preaching is compelling to young secular adults not if preachers use video clips from their favorite movies and dress informally and sound sophisticated, but if the preachers understand their hearts and culture so well that listeners feel the force of the sermon’s reasoning, even if in the end they don’t agree with it. This is not a matter of style or program.

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

BOOKS ON BIBLICAL CHURCHES

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

BOOKS ON “HOW TO DO CHURCH”

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

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

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

HARDWARE, MIDDLEWARE, SOFTWARE

What was this deeper level, exactly? As time went on, I began to realize it was a middle space between two more obvious dimensions of ministry. All of us have a *doctrinal foundation* — a set of theological beliefs — and all of us conduct particular *forms of ministry*. But many ministers take up programs and practices of ministry that fit well with neither their doctrinal beliefs nor their cultural context. They adopt popular methods that are essentially “glued on” from the outside — alien to the church’s theology or setting (sometimes both!). And when this happens, we find a lack of fruitfulness. These ministers don’t change people’s lives within the church and don’t reach people in their city. Why not? Because the programs do not grow naturally out of reflection on both the gospel and the distinctness of their surrounding culture.

For example, imagine that a minister who had a flourishing ministry in an exurban area moves to an urban setting. He continues to preach and pastor in exactly the same way he did before, and soon he sees an alarming drop in attendance and in lives being changed. He may go in one of three directions. First, he may simply keep doing the same thing, attributing lack of fruit to the hard-heartedness of urban dwellers. Second, he may read books, looking for new programs that worked elsewhere — usually in suburban U.S. contexts — and finding that when he adopts them, they are also ineffective

in his new setting. Third, he may actually come to believe he needs to reengineer and change his doctrinal foundation, reasoning that contemporary people can't accept traditional teachings on judgment and atonement. In each case, however, he is failing to notice the middle space between doctrine and practice — the space where we reflect deeply on our theology and our culture to understand how both of them can shape our ministry. This leads to better choices of existing ministry forms, or to the development of promising new ones.

Therefore, if you think of your doctrinal foundation as “hardware” and of ministry programs as “software,” it is important to understand the existence of something called “middleware.” I am no computer expert (to say the least), but my computer-savvy friends tell me that middleware is a software layer that lies between the hardware and operating system itself and the various software applications being deployed by the computer's user. In the same way, between one's doctrinal beliefs and ministry practices should be a well-conceived vision for how to bring the gospel to bear on the particular cultural setting and historical moment. This is something more practical than just doctrinal beliefs but much more theological than “how-to steps” for carrying out a particular ministry. Once this vision is in place, with its emphases and values, it leads church leaders to make good decisions on how to worship, disciple, evangelize, serve, and engage culture in their field of ministry — whether in a city, suburb, or small town.

THEOLOGICAL VISION

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

Theology must first be about a conversation with God... God speaks and we listen... The Christian theological framework is primarily about listening—listening to God. One of the great dangers we face in doing theology is our desire to do all the talking... We most often capitulate to this temptation by placing alien conceptual boundaries on what God can and has said in the Word... We force the message of redemption into a cultural package that distorts its actual intentions. Or we attempt to view the gospel solely from

*the perspective of a tradition that has little living connection to the redemptive work of Christ on the cross. Or we place rational restrictions on the very notion of God instead of allowing God to define the notions of rationality.*⁴

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

Lints explains why we cannot stop with our doctrinal foundation but must also look at our setting — our historical moment and our cultural location:

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

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

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

A theological vision allows [people] to see their culture in a way different than they had ever been able to see it before... Those who are empowered by the theological vision do not simply stand against the mainstream impulses of the culture but take the initiative both to understand and speak to that culture from the framework of the Scriptures... The modern theological

*vision must seek to bring the entire counsel of God into the world of its time in order that its time might be transformed.*⁷

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

- What is the gospel, and how do we bring it to bear on the hearts of people today?
- What is this culture like, and how can we both connect to it and challenge it in our communication?
- Where are we located — city, suburb, town, rural area — and how does this affect our ministry?
- To what degree and how should Christians be involved in civic life and cultural production?
- How do the various ministries in a church — word and deed, community and instruction — relate to one another?
- How innovative will our church be and how traditional?
- How will our church relate to other churches in our city and region?
- How will we make our case to the culture about the truth of Christianity?

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

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

invisible, people inevitably (and unfortunately) conclude that the differences are doctrinal.

It could be argued that an acquaintance with the category of theological vision will help us understand many of the conflicts in local churches and denominations. Our doctrinal statements of faith and confessions do not tell us what in our culture can be affirmed and what can be challenged, nor do they speak directly to our relationship to tradition and the Christian past or reflect much on how human reason operates. Yet our ministries are shaped profoundly by our assumptions about these issues. When we see other people who say they believe our doctrine but are doing ministry in a way we greatly dislike, we tend to suspect they have fallen away from their doctrinal commitments. They may have, of course; yet it's equally likely that they haven't strayed but are working from a different theological vision. Unless we can make these assumptions more visible and conscious, we will misunderstand one another and find it difficult to respect one another.

Perhaps we can diagram it like this (see next page). Our theological vision, growing out of our doctrinal foundation but including implicit or explicit readings of culture, is the most immediate cause of our decisions and choices regarding ministry expression.

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

THE FORMATION OF THEOLOGICAL VISION

According to Richard Lints in *The Fabric of Theology*, four factors influence the formation of a theological vision. The foundation is, of course, *listening to the Bible to arrive at our doctrinal beliefs* (pp. 57 – 80). The second is *reflection on culture* (pp. 101 – 16), as we ask what modern culture is and which of its impulses are to be criticized and which are to be affirmed. A third is our particular *understanding of reason* (pp. 117 – 35). Some see human reason as being able to lead a nonbeliever a long way toward the truth, while others deny this. Our view of the nature of human rationality will shape how we preach to, evangelize, argue with, and engage with

non-Christians. The fourth factor is the role of *theological tradition* (pp. 83 – 101). Some believers are antitraditionalists who feel free to virtually reinvent Christianity each generation without giving any weight to the interpreters of the Christian community in the past. Others give great weight to tradition and are opposed to innovation with regard to communicating the gospel and practicing ministry.

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

WHY A WHOLE BOOK ON THEOLOGICAL VISION?

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

Redeemer City to City is a nonprofit organization involved in global city church planting on every continent, across a wide array of theological traditions. It should not be surprising that nearly all of our training and coaching centers on the theological vision outlined in this book. Once we assess prospective church planters for their gifts and theological soundness, we spend relatively little time on doctrinal foundations (though our training is highly theological) or ministry expression (though church planters are

wrestling with concrete issues of expression and form in their respective churches). Here is what we have found in two decades of experience.

WHAT TO DO

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

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

HOW TO SEE

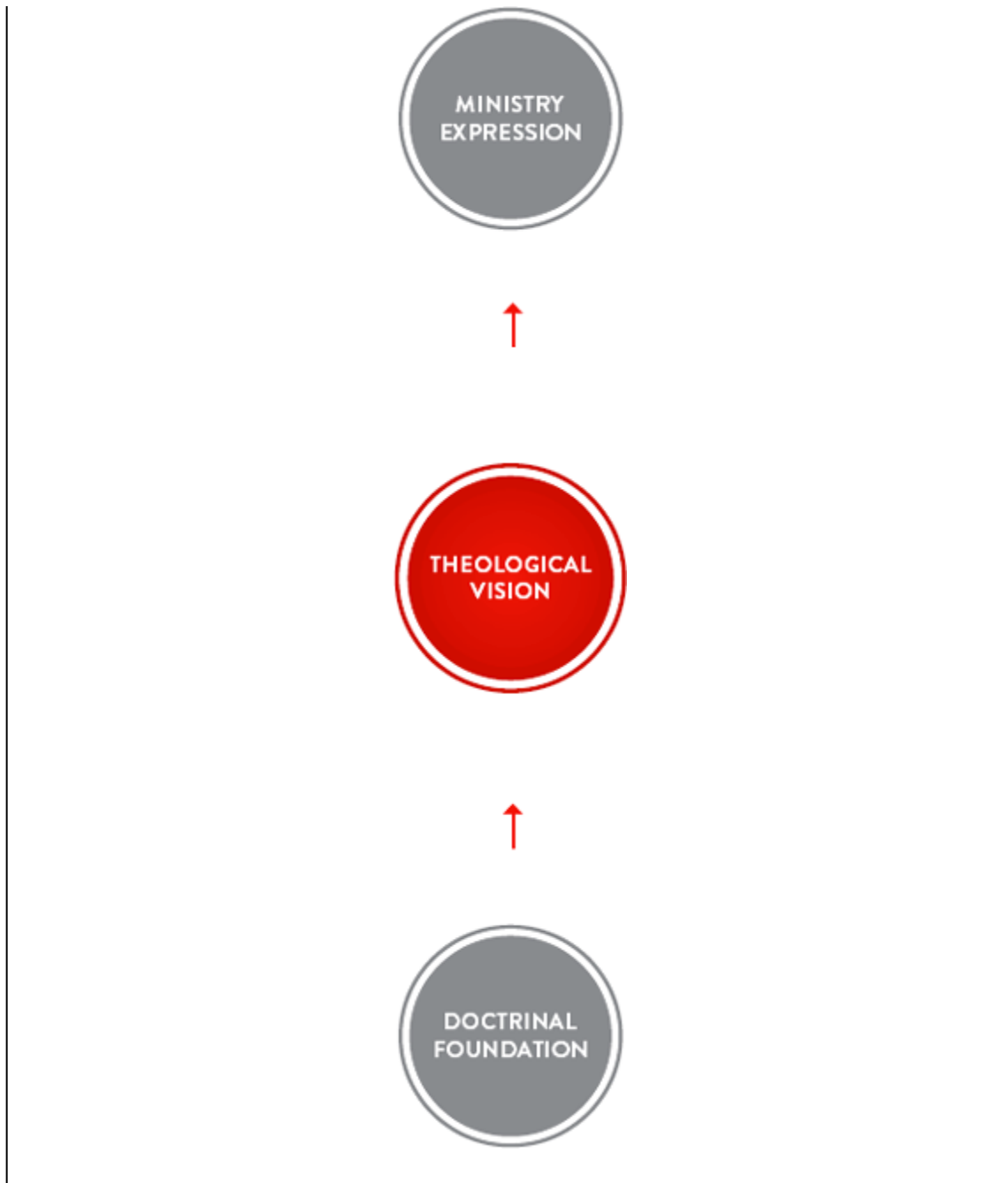
A faithful restatement of the gospel with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in a type of culture at a moment in history

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

WHAT TO BELIEVE

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

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



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

vision often determines the vitality of the ministry, particularly in urban settings.

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

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

CENTER CHURCH

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

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

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

2. The center is the place of balance. In this book, you will hear a great deal about the need to strike balances as Scripture does: of word *and* deed ministries; of challenging *and* affirming human culture; of cultural engagement *and* countercultural distinctiveness; of commitment to truth *and*

generosity to others who don't share the same beliefs; of tradition *and* innovation in practice.

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

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

CENTER CHURCH COMMITMENTS

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

MIDDLEWARE, THEOLOGICAL VISION, AND DNA

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

Why use this particular image? DNA is a set of instructions deep within the cells of an organism that directs how it develops, grows, and self-replicates. At the core of Redeemer's ministry is orthodox evangelical theology — the classic doctrines of the biblical gospel. We want our doctrine to act as a control and driver of our ministry,

and this will only happen if we use doctrine to generate a theological vision. We do so by asking, “*How* should this unchanging gospel doctrine be communicated and embodied in a great, global city like New York in this day and age?” Our answers to this question — our theological vision — are the DNA that enables us to choose or develop ministry expressions that are not only consistent with our doctrinal commitments but that fit our time, place, and culture. As a result, our ministry can develop, grow, and self-replicate fruitfully.

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

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

City. A second major area of a Center Church theological vision has to do with our cultural context. All churches must understand, love, and identify with their local community and social setting, and yet at the same time be able and willing to critique and challenge it. Because Redeemer was a

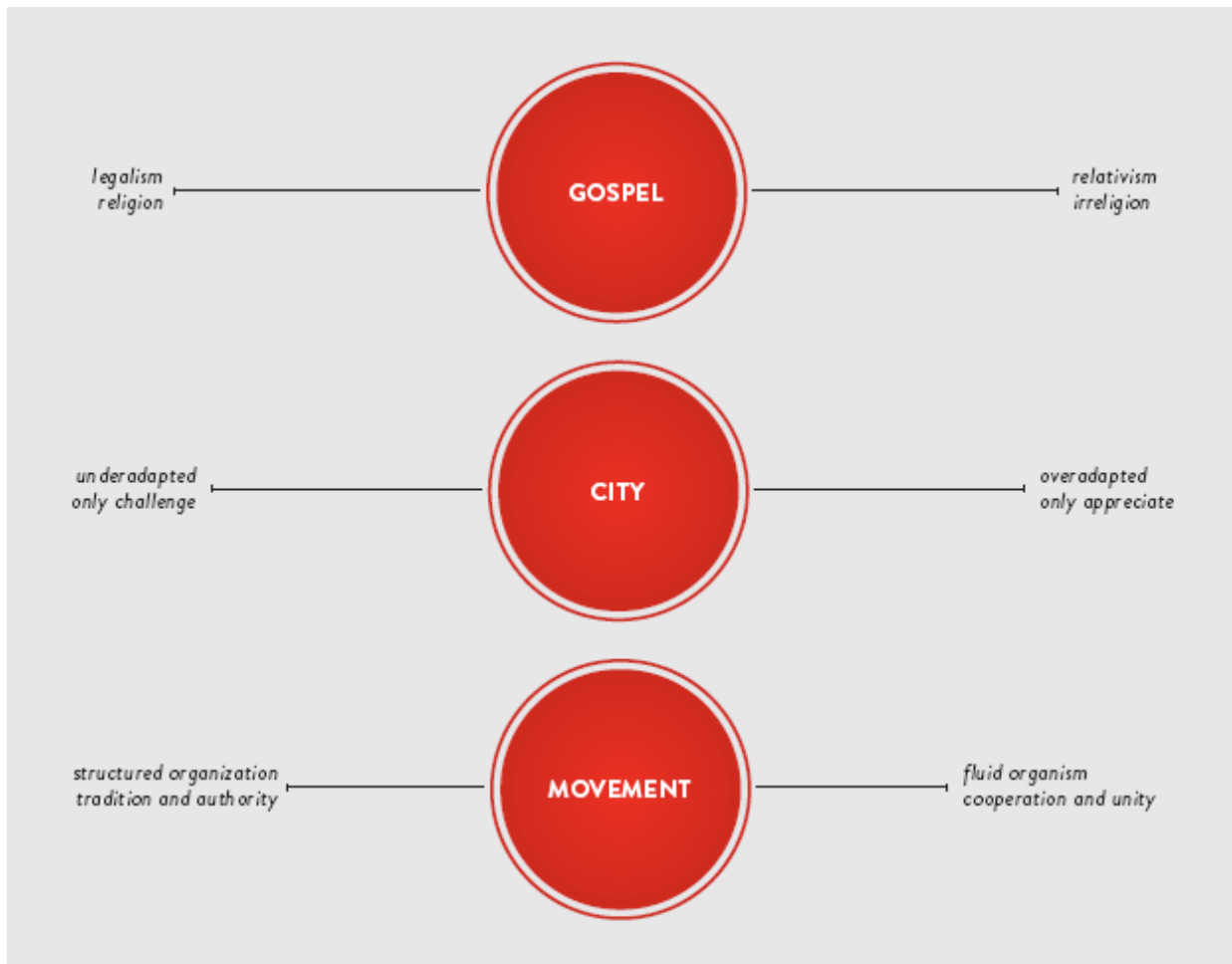
ministry operating in a major urban center, we had to spend time studying the Bible to see what it said about cities in particular — and to our surprise we found that it said a lot. Every church, whether located in a city, suburb, or rural area (and there are many permutations and combinations of these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

Movement. The last area of theological vision has to do with your church’s *relationships* — with its community, with its recent and deeper past, and with other churches and ministries. Richard Lints points out that one of the elements of a theological vision has to do with our understanding of tradition. Some churches are highly institutional, with a strong emphasis on their own past, while others are anti-institutional, fluid, and marked by constant innovation and change. Some churches see themselves as being loyal to a particular ecclesiastical tradition — and so they cherish historical and traditional liturgy and ministry practices. Those that identify very strongly with a particular denomination or newer tradition often resist change. At the other end of the spectrum are churches with little sense of a theological and ecclesiastical past that tend to relate easily to a wide variety of other churches and ministries. All of these different perspectives have an enormous impact on how we actually do ministry. Again, they are not included in systematic theology — these issues are not solved by historical confessions or statements of faith. On the other hand, they pose deeper concerns than the practical ministry books can address.¹⁰

THE BALANCE OF THREE AXES

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

is to think of three axes.



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

brought together to penetrate people's hearts so they experience conviction of sin and the beauty of grace. Our communication and practices must not tend toward either law or license. To the degree that they do, they lose life-changing power.¹¹

2. The *City axis* (which could also be called a *Culture axis*). We will show that to reach people we must appreciate and adapt to their culture, but we must also challenge and confront it. This is based on the biblical teaching that all cultures have God's grace and natural revelation in them, yet they are also in rebellious idolatry. If we overadapt to a culture, we have accepted the culture's idols. If, however, we underadapt to a culture, we may have turned our own culture into an idol, an absolute. If we overadapt to a culture, we aren't able to change people because we are not calling them to change. If we underadapt to a culture, no one will be changed because no one will listen to us; we will be confusing, offensive, or simply unpersuasive. To the degree a ministry is overadapted or underadapted to a culture, it loses life-changing power.

3. The *Movement Axis*. Some churches identify so strongly with their own theological tradition that they cannot make common cause with other evangelical churches or other institutions to reach a city or work for the common good. They also tend to cling strongly to forms of ministry from the past and are highly structured and institutional. Other churches are strongly anti-institutional. They have almost no identification with a particular heritage or denomination, nor do they have much of a relationship to a Christian past. Sometimes they have virtually no institutional character, being completely fluid and informal. As we will show later, a church at either extreme will stifle the development of leadership and strangle the health of the church as a corporate body, as a community.¹² To the degree that it commits either of these errors, it loses its life-giving power.

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

I hope this book will be especially useful for those ministering in urban and cultural centers. But even if you are not literally in such a center, I

believe you can still minister “from the center” by being aware of these three axes and adjusting your ministry expressions accordingly.

In the rest of the book, I explain as best I can what it means to center on the three commitments of Gospel, City, and Movement. The Center Church theological vision is further broken down into eight elements, which are treated in the eight parts of this volume:¹³

Section 1: GOSPEL

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

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

Section 2: CITY

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

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

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

Section 3: MOVEMENT

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

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

Part 8: Movement Dynamics. We have a mind-set of willing cooperation with other believers, not being turf conscious and suspicious but eagerly promoting a vision for the whole city.¹⁴

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

Introduction — Center Church Theological Vision

1. Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*. There are many editions of this book, and some are online. This quote is taken from Lecture 2 — “The Call to the Ministry.”
2. Jonathan Edwards, “Christian Charity: The Duty of Charity to the Poor Explained and Enforced,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. E. Hickman (Carlisle, Pa.: Banner of Truth, 1974), 2:171. In this treatise, Edwards uses the phrase “rules of the gospel” to refer to the shape of Christ’s work of salvation (sacrificial self-giving to those who are spiritually poor and bankrupt), which must in turn shape how we behave in the world. He infers from the gospel that we should (1) forgive those who wrong us, (2) give to the poor — even the “undeserving poor,” and (3) help others, even when we cannot afford to. Edwards draws out the implications of Christ’s substitutionary atonement and our free justification for every area of life. He gives us a good example in this essay of how reflection on the core elements of the gospel leads to a commitment to ministry to the poor.
3. Richard Lints, *The Fabric of Theology: A Prolegomenon to Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 9.
4. *Ibid.*, 82.
5. *Ibid.*, 315.
6. *Ibid.*, 83.
7. *Ibid.*, 316–17.

8. These three areas correspond roughly to Richard Lints's four theological vision factors in this way: (1) *Gospel* flows from how you read the Bible, (2) *City* flows from your reflections on culture, and (3) *Movement* flows from your understanding of tradition. Meanwhile the fourth factor — your view of human rationality — influences your understanding of all three. It has an impact on how you evangelize non-Christians, how much common grace you see in a culture, and how institutional (or anti-institutional) you are in your thinking about ministry structure.
9. See D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Revival* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1982); see also Sinclair Ferguson's three lectures on the Marrow Controversy, www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?seriesOnly=true&currSection=sermonstopic&SourceID=gpts&keyworddesc=The+Marrow+Controversy&keyword=The+Marrow+Controversy (accessed December 30, 2011).
0. For example, virtually all of the popular church growth books assume that churches have no distinctive ecclesiastical traditions. The volumes treat Reformed, Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, and Lutheran churches as if they are all alike. But there is no theological or exegetical argument offered for this. It is simply assumed that historical tradition means little or nothing.
1. It can be argued that the Gospel axis is not like the other two. In the other two axes, the desired position is a midpoint, a balance between extremes. However, Sinclair Ferguson (in his lectures on the Marrow Controversy) and others have argued that the gospel is not at all a balance between two opposites but an entirely different thing. In fact, it can also be argued that legalism and antinomianism are not opposites but essentially the same thing — self-salvation — opposed to the gospel. So please note that putting Gospel between these two extremes is simply a visual shorthand.
2. Astute readers will notice later in this book that I advise churches to *not* occupy an exact midpoint on the spectrum between a structured organization and a fluid organism. I suggest you occupy a position a couple of steps toward the organism end to maintain a spirit of innovation and creativity. So while this three-axis schematic does not precisely convey all we want to say about each topic, it is a good way to remember the basic themes and emphases.
3. Some have pointed out that these eight elements cover roughly the same territory covered by Francis Schaeffer in his seminal short book titled *2 Contents, 2 Realities* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1975), based on his address to the first Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization held in July 1974. Schaeffer's address covers four things he saw as "absolutely necessary if we as Christians are to meet the need of our age and the overwhelming pressure we are increasingly facing" (p. 7). These four things are sound doctrine; contextual, cultural engagement ("honest answers to honest questions"); a spiritual recovering of the gospel for our hearts ("true spirituality"); and remarkable, vital Christian community ("the beauty of human relationships"). I hope the balance of Schaeffer's elements will be reflected in my similar but somewhat more specific list.

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

Center Church Balances: Gospel Balance



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

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

- Know that the kingdom is already *and* not yet.
- Demonstrate the harmony of grace and truth.
- Promote revivalism that recognizes the formative role of the church, yet also addresses the individual heart.
- Counsel believers to have both doctrine/knowledge and experience/feeling.

Center Church Balances: City Balance



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

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

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

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

Center Church Balances:

Movement Balance



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

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

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

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

ABBREVIATIONS

BIBLE BOOKS

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

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

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

BIBLE VERSIONS

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

GENERAL

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

Acknowledgments

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

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

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

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

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

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

Praise for *Center Church*

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

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

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

Bryan Chapell, president, Covenant Theological Seminary

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Randy Pope, pastor, Perimeter Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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

J. I. Packer, professor emeritus, Regent College

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Alan Hirsch, founder of Forge Missional Training Network

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

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

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

Philip Ryken, president, Wheaton College

ZONDERVAN

Gospel Theology

Copyright © 2012 by Redeemer City to City and Timothy J. Keller

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this ebook on-screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of Zondervan.

Previously Published in *Center Church*

Epub Edition © August 2013 ISBN: 978-0-310-51692-7

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

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from The Holy Bible, *New International Version*®, *NIV*®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Scripture quotations marked ESV are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the *New American Standard Bible*. Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by

permission.

Scripture quotations marked KJV are taken from the King James Version of the Bible.

Any Internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means — electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other — except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design: Kristin Spix Design

Cover photography: Last Refuge/Robert Harding

About

About Redeemer City to City

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

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

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



About the Author

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

www.AuthorTracker.com for exclusive information on your favorite HarperCollins author.

About the Publisher

Founded in 1931, Grand Rapids, Michigan-based Zondervan, a division of HarperCollinsPublishers, is the leading international Christian communications company, producing best-selling Bibles, books, new media products, a growing line of gift products and award-winning children's products. The world's largest Bible publisher, Zondervan (www.zondervan.com) holds exclusive publishing rights to the *New International Version of the Bible* and has distributed more than 150 million copies worldwide. It is also one of the top Christian publishers in the world, selling its award-winning books through Christian retailers, general market bookstores, mass merchandisers, specialty retailers, and the Internet. Zondervan has received a total of 68 Gold Medallion awards for its books, more than any other publisher.



Read all eight sections of *Center Church* in print or eBook!

Hardcover, Printed edition: 978-0-310-49418-8

Full eBook: 978-0-310-297-6254-9

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

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

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

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

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

Gospel Theology - 9780310516880



Gospel Renewal - 9780310516897



Gospel Contextualization - 9780310516903



City Vision - 9780310516927



Cultural Engagement - 9780310516934



Missional Community - 9780310516941



Integrative Ministry - 9780310516958



Movement Dynamics - 9780310516965



www.zondervan.com

