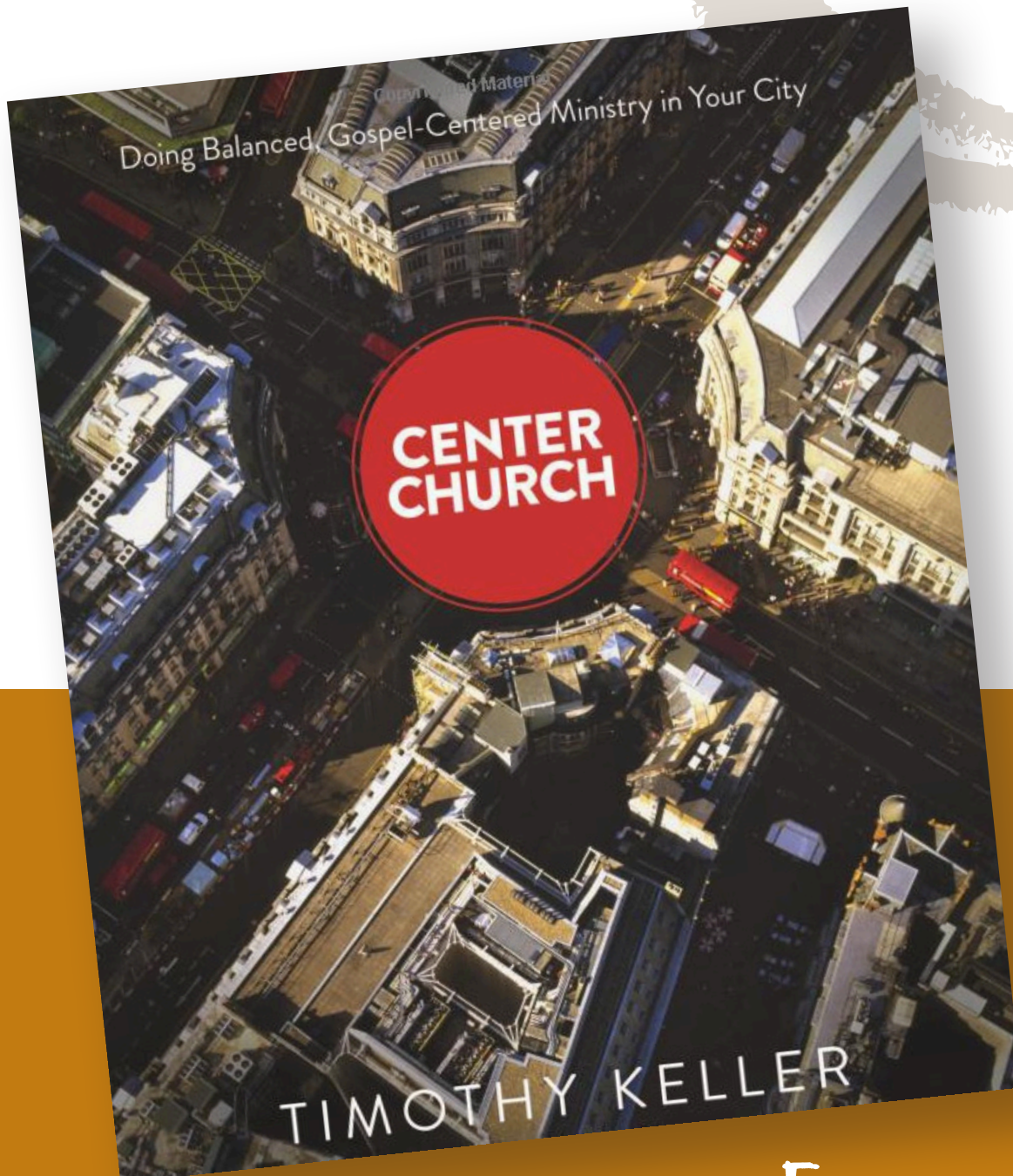


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*Free Book Summaries.
Created for Church Leaders.*

Center Church | *Tim Keller*

Center Church – Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City
Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI, 2012. 395 pages.



CENTER
CHURCH

Once we embark on a life of ministry, it is only natural to ask, “How am I doing? And how will I know?”

One typical answer for pastors is **success**. If your church is growing in conversions, members, and giving, your ministry is effective. In reaction to an emphasis on quantifiable success, many have countered that the only true criterion is **faithfulness**. All that matters is that a pastor be sound in doctrine, godly in character, and faithful in preaching and pastoring people.

Could it be that a more biblical theme for pastoral evaluation is fruitfulness?

Many church leaders characterize Pastor Tim Keller and Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City as being both “successful” and “faithful.” Redeemer and Keller weren’t satisfied; they were searching for more. After years of study, training, and teaching other church leaders, it became evident that the real “secret” of Redeemer’s fruitfulness was not so much the particular ministry expression but the **way** in which they arrived at the expressions they used.

Redeemer 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 their midst, and about the emotional 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 Redeemer’s ministry in a global city center.

Two kinds of books are ordinarily written for pastors and church leaders. One kind lays out general biblical principles for all churches starting with **doctrine** - scriptural exegesis and biblical theology. Another category is the **practical** “how-to” books that describe specific mind-sets, programs, and ways to do church.

There is a 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. Led by Tim Keller, Redeemer found that middle space – and the result is Center Church.

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.” Middleware is a well-conceived vision for how to bring the gospel to bear on the particular cultural setting and historical moment.

Once this vision is in place, with its emphases and values, it enables 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.

Center Church | *Tim Keller (cont'd)*



The reason that churches with the same basic doctrine are shaped by different theological visions is because that they are answering questions about culture, tradition, and rationality differently.

What is 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.

After two decades of experience, Redeemer has found three principles of theological vision:

1	Theological vision is hard, but it is what pastors need.
2	Theological vision is transferrable and adaptable.
3	Theological vision goes beyond churches.

The Center Church theological vision can be expressed most simply in three basic commitments:

1 Gospel – it is critical in every new generation and setting to find ways to communicate the gospel clearly and strikingly, distinguishing it from its opposites and counterfeits.

2 City – 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.



Center Church | *Tim Keller (cont'd)*

8

Movement – all churches must connect with community, understand its recent and deeper past, and collaborate with other churches and ministries.

The Center Church theological vision is further broken down into eight elements:

1

Gospel Theology – characterized by our gospel-theological depth rather than by our doctrinal shallowness, pragmatism, non-reflectiveness, and method-driven philosophy.

2

Gospel Renewal – a constant note of grace is applied to everything, so that ministry is not marked by legalism or cold intellectualism.

3

Gospel Contextualization – we are sensitive to culture rather than choosing to ignore our cultural movement or being oblivious to cultural difference among groups.

4

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

5

Cultural Engagement – culturally engaged and avoid being either too triumphalistic or too withdrawn and subcultural in our attitude.

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.

7

Integrative Ministry – helping to meet the spiritual and physical needs of the poor as well as those who live and work in cultural centers.

8

Movement Dynamics – we have a mindset of willing cooperation with other believers, not being turf-conscious and suspicious but eagerly promoting a vision for the whole city.

We believe that if you embrace the process of making your theological vision visible, you will make far better choices of model and method.

Center Church | *Tim Keller (cont'd)*

Center Church recommends 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 the world.

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Recommended Resources

1. Listen to this 2-minute [video clip](#) as Tim Keller introduces the concepts behind Center Church. Go to the [Center Church website](#) and register for free resources being released each month that support Center Church.
2. Trevin Wax, Managing Editor of The Gospel Project at LifeWay Christian Resources and frequent contributor to The Gospel Coalition, interviews Tim Keller [here](#) as he talks about gospel, culture, and mission.
3. Tim Keller explores “ministry in the middle space” in an article you can read [here](#). According to Keller, one of the reasons he wrote Center Church is that he believes there is a common misunderstanding of the relationship between doctrine and ministry.

Buy the book now!

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Go Ahead Actions for Vision Clarity

by Mike Gammill

Vision Clarity Connection

There's an old saying among artists: "Good artists borrow; great artists steal." This aphorism poetically articulates that imitation can help us be good, but greatness is reserved for those who internalize and adapt what they learn from others. This is the challenge pastors face today with our rapid exchange of ministry models and expressions. While the temptation for copycat imitation has never been so close at hand, the opportunity to internalize and adapt what we learn from others for the sake of developing unique ministry expressions has never been greater.

Tim Keller's *Center Church* encourages us toward this great opportunity. He avoids the drift toward a "church in a box" danger and instead urges each church to develop its unique *theological vision* that acts as a bridge between doctrine and expression in its context and place in history. **It's not about the decisions we make; it's about the way we make decisions.**

How to Go Ahead

1. Begin Developing Theological Vision

Keller offers eight questions in the introduction to *Center Church* (page 18) to develop your theological vision. (Click [here](#) for a link to a free electronic copy of the introduction.) Invest two hours of your staff's time to begin exploring these questions. For the first hour, break key staff members into small task groups of 2-3 and assign each group one to two questions (in order to ensure that all the questions are answered) from the list for a small group "blue sky" discussion. For the second hour, gather the teams back together and have each small task group briefly present its findings. For the remainder of the time, collaboratively identify three key learnings for the team.

2. Uncover the Secret of Your Fruitfulness

Keller argues, "The secret to the Redeemer's fruitfulness was not so much the particular ministry expression but the way in which we arrived at the expressions we used." A brief but disciplined weekly reflection can help uncover and develop your "secret to fruitfulness." Dedicate fifteen minutes of individual focused reflection on the connection between your decision-making process and the fruitfulness of your decisions. Spend the first ten minutes recalling a specific decision and how your mission, values, strategy, and measures influenced it. Then, spend the next five minutes reflecting upon how your process is connected with the fruitfulness of the decision. Repeat weekly to uncover the strengths of your process and how you can more effectively lead with your vision.

3. Advance Balance in the Congregation

Keller uses three axes to convey his approach to ministry: Gospel, City, and Movement. Taste and see the benefit of gospel balance in your ministry. Keller states, "The only way into a ministry that sees people's lives changed...without authoritarianism, is through preaching the gospel to deconstruct both legalism and relativism." Reflect on your context to see which (legalism or relativism) is more prevalent and upon your ministries to see which you confront more often. Take the issue to the staff and brainstorm three ways you could restore balance.



More About Mike Gammill

As Lead Navigator for Auxano, Mike Gammill is passionate about using Vision Clarity to help the local church find its unique place in the Kingdom of God. Mike has fifteen years of experience serving the local church in multiple capacities and has a demonstrated ability to walk alongside pastors and leaders to uncover innovative ways to strategically implement vision through Christ-like leadership.

Email: mike@auxano.com Twitter: [@mikegammill](https://twitter.com/mikegammill)
Blog: mikegammill.com Phone: [406.219.1104](tel:406.219.1104)



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