

Review: Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012. By Richard J. Perhai, Ph.D.

Church planters face many challenges in the God-ordained work of establishing new churches. Cross-cultural church planters face even more challenges that demand serious calling, prayer support, and teamwork all led by the Holy Spirit. Mission agency leadership can spend months and even years mentoring new recruits and retooling missionaries for cross-cultural church planting. But one area is often overlooked. Namely that many missionary candidates from rural or suburban upbringings are unprepared for planting churches in the foreign culture of the city. Enter Timothy Keller and his book *Center Church*. The book is considered by many a compendium of much Keller has written before. For example, his emphasis on keeping the gospel central to the mission of the church, both in internal and external ministries, is commendable (parts 1–2; pp. 29–85).

Center Church is neither a how-to book on city church planting, nor is it simply a biblical mandate for such ministry. Rather it blends the two into what Keller (and Richard Lints) refers to as a “theological vision” (17–19) for city church planting. How-to books put too much emphasis on what worked in one context and not enough emphasis on contextualizing. Whereas biblical mandate books about the church abound (cf. list on p. 15). But very few books blend these two into a modern handbook for developing a theological vision (and philosophy of ministry) for cross-cultural church planting teams. Keller believes *Center Church* helps to fill this gap (20–21). Keller himself entered New York City about 25 years ago to plant a church. And his organization Redeemer City to City is helping church planters to plant churches in world-class cities around the globe. *Center Church* is the fruit of all of this.

The book is not for those looking for quick answers. But its 400 pages on developing a theological vision will be worth the effort for teams looking to integrate gospel-centered ministries into their urban culture without under-adapting or over-adapting to that culture (parts 3–5; pp. 89–247). Keller believes world-class city dwellers around the globe share a common set of perspectives and values. And *Center Church* gives insights into some of these. It also, in parts 6–8 (250–380), addresses the concepts of missional community, integrative ministry, and church planting movements.

Perhaps the most impressive part of the book for me is Keller’s handling of the numerous approaches to cultural engagement. How should Christians and local churches engage their surrounding culture? Some argue for Christians bringing cultural transformation by being the best in whatever area of work God has called them to (195–201). While others (counter culture model) question whether Christians should even get involved in the broader culture (205–209). Keller organizes the numerous approaches to cultural engagement into four categories, showing the strengths and weaknesses of each. Then he suggests that each of them is “right ... and wrong” because they only emphasize one of the four aspects of the biblical story or plotline (creation, fall, redemption, restoration; cf. 225). Keller suggests that if the church is to effectively engage the culture as God’s instrument, we need to blend the four categories, which together “do justice to the fullness of the biblical story line” (235). In keeping with his “centering” theme, Keller does not ask anyone to abandon their tradition for cultural engagement, but to move it towards the center of the matrix of the four categories (cf. 231). He believes these “blended insights” will lead to churches and church members who express “humble excellence” for the “common good,” while maintaining the Church as counter cultural with a “distinctive worldview” (cf. 231–243).

So if you are going to be planting a church in a large city, or already find yourself in this role and are looking for tools for your team to develop a clear philosophy of ministry that keeps the gospel central, but also engages your city, *Center Church* may be just the tool you’re looking for.