

Center Church Unpacked – Session 1

What kind of book is Center Church?

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, . . . 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.

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.”

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.

A 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.” **Theological vision** is a vision for what you are going to do with your doctrine in a particular time and place.

Tim Keller, Center Church.

Center Church is a book written to help you develop a healthy Theological Vision for your church that under God will lead to a greater gospel fruitfulness that remains faithful to the gospel itself.

Why is a so-called “theological vision” so important for church planting?

Introduction

‘Why do we do what we do as a church?’

Is it as simple as saying our practices or ministry expressions are simply the outworking of our doctrinal beliefs?

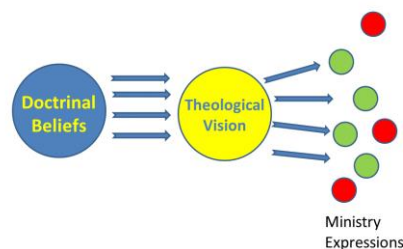


Why would what we do as a church be any different from any other church that shared an identical set of doctrinal convictions or Confession of Faith?

Maybe something else is at work. Something more than doctrinal beliefs.

'Why do we do what we do?' *depends* on doctrinal beliefs and *grows out* of doctrinal beliefs but there is something else at work, something that might be called 'Theological vision'.

If doctrine is 'what we believe' and ministry is 'what we do' then theological vision is 'how we see'.



For planters it is possible for us to be unaware of how theological vision is functioning in the life of our plant. It can, unless we give it serious thought, remain *invisible*. It is always functioning but our need is to properly understand it and to articulate it.

A. What is Theological Vision?

Tim Keller says our theological vision is answers the question 'What does it mean to be a church in our *time* and *place*?'

'A Theological Vision helps you determine what you are going to do with what you believe within your cultural setting.' Michael Felkin

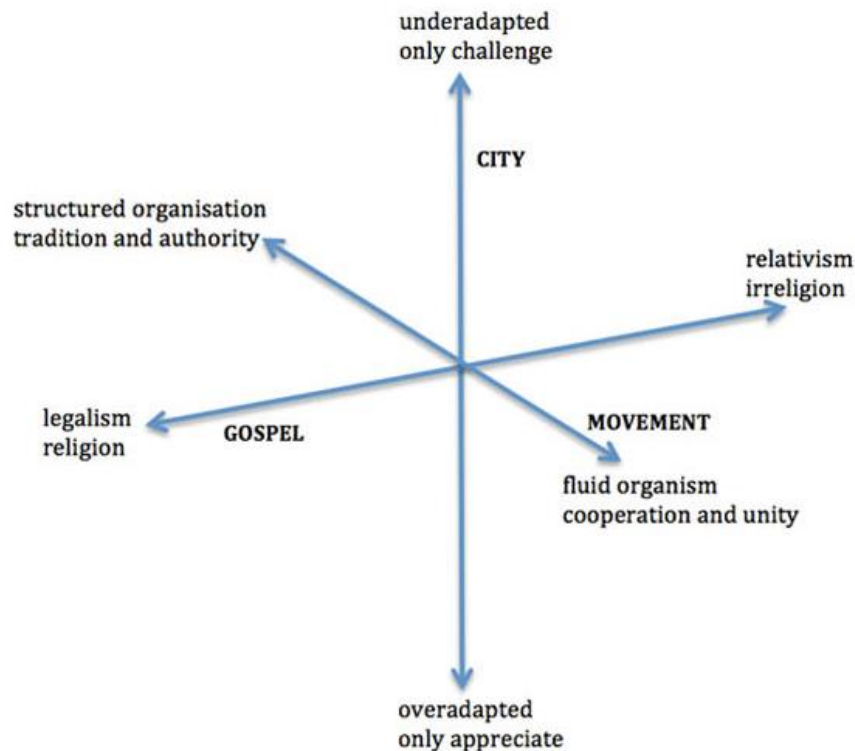
Tim Keller considers Theological Vision under three categories:

Gospel - Theological Vision grows in and out of the gospel. What is the gospel? How do you communicate the gospel? At the centre of the axis between legalism and relativism.

City – Theological Vision is shaped by a deep reflection on what it means to 'understand, love, and identify with our city' yet 'at the same time be able and willing to critique and challenge it.' Where are you located, urban, suburban, etc.? (questions of place). What is the baseline cultural narrative?

(questions of time). At the centre of the axis between over-adapting to culture or under-adapting to culture.

Movement – Theological vision arises from an understanding of gospel partnership. What is the nature of relationship between churches? At the centre of the axis between institutionalism v. absolute fluidity.



B. Why is Theological Vision so important to church planting?

‘It’s one thing to have a grasp on sound biblical doctrine. It’s another thing to know how to communicate, embody and practise the doctrine in a particular time and place.’ Tim Keller

None of us just ‘teach the Bible’ but rather our doctrine + view of culture = Theological vision

*‘With a Theological Vision in place, leaders and churches can make **better choices** about ministry expression that are **faithful to the Gospel** while at the same time are **meaningful to their ministry context**. That means a greater impact in Worship, Discipleship, Evangelism, Service, and Cultural Engagement.’* Michael Felker

Theological vision enables us to make better choices about what we do because they are both faithful **and** meaningful. Through our theological vision we come up with a way of assessing and living out the gospel that helps us answer how we do everything we do as a church.

Questions for the development of a theological vision (taken from Center Church):

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

Theological Vision is particularly important for the church in the 21st century. Stuart Murray speaks of 7 Transitions for the church after Christendom.

- 1) **From the centre to the margins:** In Christendom the Christian story and the churches were central, but in post-Christendom these are marginal.
- 2) **From majority to minority:** In Christendom Christians comprise the (often overwhelming) majority, but in post-Christendom we are a minority.
- 3) **From settlers to sojourners:** In Christendom Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by their story, but in post-Christendom we are aliens, exiles and pilgrims in a culture where we no longer feel at home.
- 4) **From privilege to plurality:** In Christendom Christians enjoyed many privileges, but in post-Christendom we are one community among many in a plural society.
- 5) **From control to witness:** in Christendom churches could exert control over society, but in post-Christendom we exercise influence only through witnessing to our story and its implications.
- 6) **From maintenance to mission:** in Christendom the emphasis was on maintaining a supposedly Christian status quo, but in post-Christendom it is on mission within a contested environment.
- 7) **From institution to movement:** in Christendom churches operated mainly in institutional mode, but in post-Christendom we must become again a Christian movement.¹

¹ Stuart Murray, *After Christendom*. Cited in Chester and Timmis, *Everyday Church*, 21

C. Case study 1 - Theological vision & preaching

How does a robust Theological Vision make for better preaching?

Our *doctrine* confirms a high commitment to expository preaching. Our strong conviction is that God's word, faithfully handled and carefully applied is essential to the life and growth of a healthy church c.f. 2 Timothy 4v.1-5.

Yet, our Theological Vision stresses how preaching needs to address our post-Christian secular culture.

1. Contextualisation in preaching

A strong Theological Vision will lead to strong contextualisation.

If, in my preaching, I'm offering answers to questions that are not being asked then even if my preaching is biblically accurate am I being faithful in my preaching?

Tim Keller notes contextualisation means 'giving people (1) the Bible's answers, which they may not want to hear, to (2) questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, (3) in language and forms they can comprehend, and (4) through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them.'

2. Preaching and secularisation

Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) summarised by James K.A. Smith in *How Not to be Secular* (2014) invites us to consider what it means to be a witness to the gospel in a secular age. How do we reach 'exclusive humanists' who live in a world where the 'God-question' is simply not asked?

Taylor argues for the *fact* of secularism. Smith writes that for Taylor 'a society is secular insofar as religious belief in God is understood to be one option among others, and thus contestable (and contested).' In other words we are all secular now. Scepticism rules the day. In a world of infinite options even Christians ask 'can so many people around me be wrong – and we so right?' It seems so unlikely.

What does it feel like to live in our times? In a world of infinite options both religious life and secular life are subject to tensions that are difficult if not impossible to resolve. There are nagging doubts all round.

3. Doubts for the Christian that our preaching must address

'The secular touches everything. It not only makes unbelief possible; it also changes belief – it impinges on Christianity' notes Smith. 'There are still believers who believe the same thing as their forebears 1,500 years ago; but *how* we believe has changed.'

The very presence of other options always applies a cross-pressure of doubt on whatever belief we happen to adopt.

4. Doubts for the secularist that our preaching must address

For secularists the religious or spiritual impulses remains. A humanist view of reality lacks explanatory power especially when it comes to questions of meaning: what does it mean to be human, how should we live, how do we address evil and injustice?

5. How does Theological Vision inform and impact our preaching?

i) Humility – respectful, less triumphalistic

ii) Engaging the cultural narrative. In Christendom – at another time – we could simply preach the text assuming a shared worldview. In post-Christendom we have to engage with new views of reality. More than ever we need to ask ‘how does this sermon affirm and challenge the culture in which we live?’²

And we ask that question as much for the sake of the Christian as the non-Christian. Charles Taylor ‘we are all sceptics’.³

iii) Demonstrates an understanding of doubts and objections. ‘Christian communicators must show that they remember (or at least understand) very well what it is like not to believe.’ Tim Keller.

iv) Employs holistic applications. In a sceptical culture we prefer to ask ‘tell me that it’s *true* to show me that it *works*’. Preaching needs to employ worked through applications in which we show how the whole life is shaped by the gospel. The complexity of modern life means we have to do this consistently and across the board.

v) Corporate Application – Preaching that highlights the difference the gospel makes to Christian life lived out in community.

C) Case study 2 - Theological Vision and gospel movements

How will our church relate to other churches in our city and region?

1. Gospel movements

A movement is *not* a formal organisation, association or denomination. A movement is an *organic* network of churches shaped by a shared vision and the values needed to get us there.

Tim Keller writes in Center Church ‘*movements are marked by a compelling vision.*’ Movements are not the meeting of church leaders for fellowship nor the gathering of congregations for mutual encouragement. Rather, gospel movements are goal-driven and mission-minded endeavours ie churches choosing to work together towards a common goal to meet an obvious *need* that cannot be met alone.

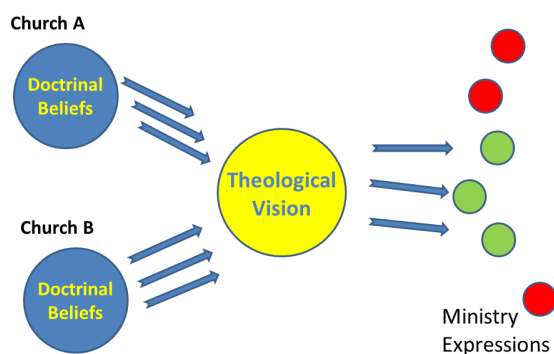
2020birmingham has a clear, coherent and compelling vision – birthing a church-planting movement for the city of Birmingham through the planting of 20 church-planting churches between 2010 and 2020. Building our intention into our name also helps keep us focused!

2. Movements arise from shared Theological Vision

A shared *Theological Vision* is central to driving the movement and to keeping us on track.

² See Keller, *Preaching*, Chapter 4 – Preaching Christ to the Culture.

³ see Keller, *Preaching*, Chapter 5 – Preaching and the (Late) Modern Mind.



The theological vision that unites us in 2020birmingham may be expressed as simply as

- A love for the Lord Jesus – this is a *gospel* initiative
- A love for this city – we share a commitment to working together in a shared geographical area
- A conviction that church-planting must play a crucial part in reaching the city for the Lord Jesus.

By focusing our partnership around shared theological vision (rather than doctrine or methodology) we are able to encourage and foster a greater degree of partnership. Rather than asking ‘do we believe exactly the same things?’ (doctrine) or ‘do we share the same practises?’ (methodology) we ask ‘do we share the same vision?’

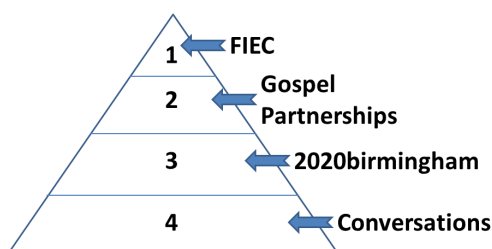
3. Movements are demonstrations of ‘Level 3’ partnerships

Level 1 partnerships *celebrate* doctrinal convictions eg what theological convictions are expressed in your own denomination or association or network (perhaps also convictions that are required)? That could be a view of church governance, baptism, spiritual gifts, etc.

Level 2 partnerships are defined by ministry expressions eg In the UK Gospel Partnerships exist to strengthen expository preaching.

Level 3 partnerships are enabled by shared theological vision e.g. in an earlier generation Evangelistic rallies, now more likely to be mercy ministries, church-planting.

Levels of partnership



4. Level 3 partnerships involve a high commitment to two principles

- *Generosity of Spirit* – working across ‘boundaries’ with evangelicals we had not previously met let alone worked with.
- *Invisibility* – working for the good of others; giving up time and resources and perhaps money to bless other churches outside of your network. ‘*Let us seek with great and ardent desire and eagerness those things which we seek only for God’s glory.*’ Calvin

5. Level 3 partnerships face certain challenges

- **Time.** Investing in new friendships and partnerships takes time and energy
- **Risk.** How do you discover who you can work with?
- **Sacrifice.** Energy has to go to level 3 partnerships at the expense of some level 1 and level 2 partnerships.

D. A model of theological vision⁴

Romans 15:1-3

How the gospel should shape our church? You shouldn’t have a church that pleases itself.

The gospel gives us freedom. We should use this freedom to ask ‘how do we have a church not for ourselves but non-Christians, poor, other Christians?’

1. A church not just for ourselves but for those who don’t believe

Build a church that is not alien to people around you.

We are a church for people who do not yet believe – as accessible, as non-alien as possible.

Tell us the kind of church we need to be for you to bring your non-Christian friends.

2. A church not just for ourselves but for the poor

How do we get everyone in the church engaged in the city?

3. A church not just for ourselves but for the whole body of Christ

It is our job to see the whole church across the city flourish

4. A church not just for ourselves but that is creating community (an alternate human society)

Modern people are taught to be consumers but we need a church in which people are committed to the community.

⁴ <https://vimeo.com/53857842> - Tim Keller, Introduction: Center Church Theological Vision