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Timothy Keller: Champion for the City: Keller's Philosophy of Urban Contextualization

Abstract

Timothy Keller's 2023 passing serves as an occasion to consider his ministry legacy. His magnum opus, *Center Church*, encapsulated his philosophy of contextualization. This philosophy was rooted in a robust theology that informed and balanced missions, evangelism, and church planting. Keller's passion for city missions defied current ministry trends that favored suburbia and avoided urban contexts. His ministry conviction overcame cultural opposition and ministry bias and grew a thriving ministry in an unlikely ministry setting. Keller's ministry captured the imagination of rising generations of pastors, missionaries, and ministry practitioners and provided the needed theological framework and training for successful urban ministry. He started and led Redeemer Presbyterian Church to become an influential mega-church, and his ministry inspired hundreds of new churches within American urban contexts. Keller's championing of city missions overcame cultural obstacles, reduced the fear of cities, and inspired Christians to restore cities to God's intended design.

Keywords

Christianity, Missions, Gospel, Ecclesiology, City, Evangelical, Presbyterian, Church Planting, Cultural Engagement, Doctrine, Leadership, Church, God, Salvation, Restoration, Reformation, Evangelism, Seminary, Worldview

Cover Page Footnote

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Timothy Keller: Champion for the City: Keller's Philosophy of Urban Contextualization

Pastor, author, and speaker Timothy Keller released his magnum opus, *Center Church*, in 2012. This work compiled years of Keller's thoughts, ranging from theology to cultural engagement to missiology. At the time of publication, it drew praise from notable pastors and theologians. Richard Coekin called *Center Church* "doctrinally rigorous and socially perceptive."¹ Alan Hirsch referred to Keller as a "great missionary statesman of our times."² J. I. Packer called Keller a "gift to today's church."³ *Christianity Today* stated, "Fifty years from now, if evangelical Christians are widely known for their love of cities, their commitment to mercy and justice, and their love of their neighbors, Tim Keller will be remembered as a pioneer of the new urban Christians."⁴ Keller's work was as transformational as it was timely and grounded in gospel theology. Consider, for example, that Keller's Rise Campaign saw New Yorker's engagement with gospel teaching grow to 5% of the population up from 1%.⁵ With *Center Church*, Keller created a timely resource that coincided with America's urbanization and dramatic cultural and demographic shifts.⁶ The growing pains that saw Keller's Redeemer Presbyterian Church grow into an urban megachurch that, in turn, planted hundreds of churches in urban contexts inspired *Center Church*.⁷ Countless missionaries and church planters credit this work as their ministry inspiration.⁸ Keller's gospel-centric vision challenged an evangelical community that was either content in suburbia or intimidated by urban contexts.⁹ His efforts birthed a movement that emboldened and reengaged city missions. Keller and *Center Church*'s legacy, however, transcends church planting and urban ministry. Keller was a transformational leader who recontextualized missiology, church ministry, and church leadership for the 21st century. Keller presented a philosophy of

¹ Timothy Keller, "Center Church," February 12, 2022, <https://timothykeller.com/books/center-church>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Timothy Keller, "Bio," February 20, 2022, <https://timothykeller.com/author/>.

⁵ Redeemer. "Rise Campaign," October 6, 2023, https://www.redeemer.com/learn/about_us/rise_campaign.

⁶ Becky Nicolaides and Andrew Wiese, "Suburbanization in the United States after 1945," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of American History*, April 26, 2017, <https://oxfordre.com/americanhistory/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199329175.001.0001/acrefore-9780199329175-e-64>.

⁷ "The Rev. Tim Keller Has Established a Remarkable Ministry in New York City," *First Things*, no. 273 (2017): 70.

⁸ City to City, "About," November 29, 2021, <https://citytocity.nyc/about/>.

⁹ William Myatt, "God in Gotham: Tim Keller's Theology of the City," *Missiology: An International Review* 44, no. 2 (2015): 180–193, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091829615617493>.

mission contextualization that champions fidelity to the Bible, respect for the indigenous, and an effective ministry strategy that transcends cultural settings. This article evaluates the legacy of Keller seen through *Center Church*. Despite criticisms from liberal, religious-right, and reformed sources, Timothy Keller's *Center Church* philosophy of contextualization remains an effective and biblical means of cultural engagement that continues to empower city missions after Keller's passing in 2023.

Summary

In *Center Church*, Keller encouraged church renewal and church planting in cities based on his vision of the gospel. Keller wrote, "The gospel is neither religion nor irreligion, but ... 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."¹⁰ Keller prescribed theologically-driven ministry over program-driven ministry. He described the gospel as "good news, not good advice."¹¹ Section one of *Center Church* details how this theological emphasis saves and renews individuals who then participate in the corporate renewal of the church (revival). The redemptive power of the gospel, therefore, should inform every aspect of the church.

Section two of *Center Church*, "City," applies the theology of section one into ministry contexts. By establishing a philosophy of intentional, balanced, biblical, and active contextualization, Keller set a vision for reaching cities in an appropriate manner of incarnational ministry that blends conceptual theological questions with action. Keller wrote of the city, "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."¹² Keller described a transformationist model where the church lives out faith in every aspect of life.¹³ The flexible and persuasive aspects of this method allow Christians to penetrate urban obstacles and live out its mission in the city.

Section three of *Center Church*, "Movement," engages the ecclesiological questions that help pastors handle the complexities of leading a church amid the cultural pluralism within the city and starting the multiplication of faith communities that can reach the city with the gospel. Keller wrote of movements,

¹⁰ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 27.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹² *Ibid.*, 87.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 187–88.

“Because the church is 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.”¹⁴ Keller desired for churches to balance their integrative ministries such as discipleship, evangelism, teaching, and justice. He called for a Gospel vision to bring purpose and passion for those ministries. This vision leads to healthy growth that overflows into the church planting and missions necessary to reach urban contexts with the gospel.

In *Center Church*, proper contextualization grounded in proper theology leads to effective indigenous community ministry that produces multiplying gospel movements. Keller uses the three core commitments (Gospel, City, Movement) to reframe the Christian view of the church while affirming Christianity’s classic doctrines. This essay considers Keller’s influence and legacy through his great work *Center Church*, considering how the church should be a centering institution for the city and the people living in it.

Gospel

Keller laid the foundation of his ministry in the first section of *Center Church*. Unlike many of his contemporaries who directly engaged with culture, Keller rooted his philosophy of contextualization in the gospel instead of accommodating to culture. Keller did not see the gospel as a helpful philosophy or resource that leads to self-help or enlightenment; rather, it answers the question, “What hope is there for the world?”¹⁵ Keller conceived of four doctrines as a metanarrative that can heal the world’s brokenness (God; the Word; Human Nature; Salvation).¹⁶ Keller asserted that the renewal of the gospel comes through creation, fall, redemption, and restoration,¹⁷ saying, “[W]ithout the painstaking work of establishing a changed worldview, their commitment to Christianity will be only as deep as their commitment to any other helpful ‘product.’”¹⁸ The gospel defined Keller’s worldview. To Keller, the gospel is not a set of beliefs that must be agreed to for salvation but a grid for understanding life.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., 249.

¹⁵ Ibid., *Center Church*, 32.

¹⁶ M. R. Galdamez, “Worldview Preaching in the Church: The Preaching Ministries of J. Gresham Machen and Timothy J. Keller (Order No. 3547969).” (Dissertation, Available from ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. [1282125141], 2012), 140.

¹⁷ Ibid., 140.

¹⁸ Timothy Keller, “Preaching Morality in an Amoral Age,” in *The Art & Craft of Biblical Preaching: A Comprehensive Resource for Today’s Communicators*, ed. Haddon Robinson and Craig Brian Larson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 167.

¹⁹ Timothy J. Keller, lecture “What is the Gospel?” taught August 12, 2003 [CD]; available from <http://www.redeemer3.com/>, /store; Internet.

Keller accentuated the gospel as gracious acceptance by differentiating between what the gospel is and what the gospel does.²⁰ Keller argued that the gospel is not “good advice,” it is the “Good News.”²¹ The Greek term εὐαγγελίζω (*euangelizō*, “proclaim good news”) describes deliverance from danger (Psalms 40:9).²² This perspective defines the relationship between God and humanity. This worldview orients humanity to God’s purposes and plans, not the opposite. God is not just creator; he is also a good and loving steward of creation. God’s redemption of creation extends to believers as they can restore their views of love, family, sexuality, self-control, culture, and witness to God’s design.²³ Keller warned, “We are trapped in a world of death, a world for which we were not designed.”²⁴ Without God’s redemptive plan, there is no purpose in life. As Christians embrace their design as image-bearers of God (*imago Dei*), they become better stewards of creation.²⁵

As this gospel worldview restores the minds and hearts of individual Christians, that worldview eventually integrates into the local church. According to Keller, the result is a holistic ministry that avoids overemphasizing evangelism, discipleship, or social concern.²⁶ This worldview provides the rubric with which the church prioritizes and balances its responsibilities.

Modern Cities vs the Biblical Context of the City

In the late 20th century, cities were maligned and abandoned for the suburbs. The process, referred to as White flight, saw communities and their institutions like schools and churches leave city centers. Yet Keller saw value in urban ministry. As the church growth movement expanded into suburbia, Keller moved his life and ministry to New York City in 1989. His work was not just strategic nor programmatic in scope but theological. Keller did not just see the ministry potential of cities but also their symbolic value. Keller said:

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

²⁰ Keller, *Center Church*, 30.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²² *Ibid.*, 29.

²³ Keller, *Center Church*, 48–49.

²⁴ Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York, NY: Viking, 2016), 164.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 48–49.

²⁶ Tim Keller, “Five Ministry Fronts in the City,” Redeemer City to City, February 3, 2004, <https://redeemercitytocity.com/articles-stories/five-ministry-fronts-in-the-city>.

Christians are adopting a romanticized view of the city. 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.²⁷

Keller rooted his urban ministry in a robust theological philosophy. It was not about a challenge or getting personal acclaim. For Keller, it was a natural outgrowth of his philosophy and attitude about cities. Instead of seeing a project, he saw an unfulfilled theological concept. This perspective gave him more remarkable patience and perseverance because metrics were not the driver; instead, it was the theological vision.

Keller described the original intent of cities as places of refuge, safety, justice, cultural development, and spiritual seeking changed with sin.²⁸ Racism, classism, violence, pride, arrogance, access, overwork, exhaustion, cults, false beliefs, and a place to escape from God and his law replaced these original intentions, and cities strayed from God's design. Keller desired to redeem cities. Keller stated that God loves people, so he cares about cities. He invokes the account of Jonah and Nineveh. In the same way God sent Jonah to save 120,000 persons (Jonah 4:11), Christians are to engage cities with the gospel. He encouraged Christians to serve and love those who need help and protection, bring God's love, peace, and justice to bear on a broken world, create and cultivate culture, and hold Christ as the ultimate satisfaction.

Keller cited the most common Hebrew word for city, *'ir*, which meant any human settlement surrounded by fortification.²⁹ Because early cities had walls, a city meant greater safety and stability.³⁰ Keller spoke of cities in 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."³¹ In addition to safety, cities offer diversity (Acts 13:1), productivity, and creativity.

In the Bible, cities have positive and negative connotations. In the line of Cain, the first murderer (Genesis 4 and 11); as a necessary place to sustain life (Psalms 104: 4-8); Canaan had fortified cities (Deuteronomy 1:28; 9:1; Joshua 14:12), which caused Israel to build their own cities (Numbers 32:16-42). Keller suggested that cities were a metaphor for confidence (Proverbs 21:22; cf.

²⁷ Ibid., 135.

²⁸ Myatt, "God in Gotham: Tim Keller's Theology of the City," 180–193.

²⁹ John A. Beck, *Zondervan Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 150.

³⁰ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, 136.

³¹ Ibid., 135.

Deuteronomy 28:52).³² Cities were places of refuge (Numbers 35; Deuteronomy 19; Joshua 20).³³ Cities take on a more positive tone after Israel enters the Promised Land (Numbers 35:11–12; Deuteronomy 19:11–12). Indeed, Jerusalem is the dwelling place for God's Name (1 Kings 14:21).³⁴

God “goes down” to judge Sodom (Genesis 18:21), Babel, later called Babylon in the Bible, comes to serve as the archetype for urban culture arrayed against God (Isaiah 13:19).³⁵ Hebrews states, “By faith Abraham... lived in tents... For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:8–10).³⁶

Keller's most poignant references to cities are found in Jeremiah 29, Isaiah 60, and Revelation 21 and 22. Keller bases his city philosophy of engagement on Jeremiah 29:4–7:

Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.³⁷

Keller exhorted Christians to emulate the exiles in Babylon. Keller explains that God commanded 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.³⁸ According to this passage, they were to become part of the city, even though it was a pagan country. Human beings are the messengers of God's redemption. At this time, God tied Babylon's success to Israel. Keller explained that Babylon wanted Israel to move into the city and lose its spiritual identity. False prophets wanted to avoid the city and keep their spiritual identity. However, God (through Jeremiah) said they should move into the city and keep their spiritual identity.³⁹ Keller added that this unique identity allowed them to serve Babylon. Amid the pagan culture,

³² Ibid., 136.

³³ Ibid., 136.

³⁴ Ibid., 140.

³⁵ Ibid., 140.

³⁶ Ibid., 140.

³⁷ Jeremiah 29: 4–7: (*English Standard Version*).

³⁸ Keller, 143.

³⁹ Timothy J Keller, *Gospel in Life Grace Changes Everything* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 8–9.

Israel stayed faithful to their heritage and still served Babylon. God was faithful to them, allowing them to eventually return to their homeland.

According to Keller, Isaiah 60 provides a vision of a restored created order that features three future realities:⁴⁰ A vision of renewed culture (Isaiah 60:11,13): The wealth of each nation will be received.⁴¹ Tarshish and Lebanon will be humbled and included in this culture.⁴²

A vision of restored shalom (Isaiah 60:18): Human relationships will be healed in the new Jerusalem.⁴³ No more war, violence, or misgivings toward one another. Healed families, relationships, and races.⁴⁴ Humans will live in perfect community in the new city. A vision of remarkable spiritual intimacy with God (Isaiah 19-20): This passage is reminiscent of Revelation chapters 21 and 22⁴⁵ in which the Lamb of God will be the source of light instead of the sun. (Revelation 21:9-27) Christians can experience God's immediate presence in the city.⁴⁶ The Tree of Life (Revelation 22:2) represents the complete restoration of God's creation.⁴⁷ If the city is mentioned in Revelation, Keller feels that Christians should embrace cities on earth.

In keeping with his view of contextualization, Keller charged that the gospel has changed the heart, community, and the world. He states this is the vision that drives Christians to action, and they need to look at cities with the anticipation of the eventual city in the new Jerusalem. This calling inspires and sustains city ministry for Keller and his followers.

Keller was drawn to city ministry at a time when pastors with rural and suburban orientation to ministry felt unprepared and intimidated by urban sprawl. The pluralistic and multicultural city was intimidating because many pastors of the previous era only knew homogenous settings. Keller did not set out to make city ministry normative or favored over other ministry types. He recognized a growing ministry need as younger generations migrated to urban settings.⁴⁸ *Center Church* allowed people to embrace an under-sourced emerging ministry.

⁴⁰ Timothy J Keller, *Gospel in Life Grace Changes Everything* Companion Video (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), Session 8.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Richard Florida, "U.S. Millennials Really Do Prefer Cities," Bloomberg.com, May 28, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-05-28/u-s-millennials-really-do-prefer-cities>.

Movement

Part 6 of *Center Church*, “Missional Community,” discusses the history, outline, and traits of a missional church today. He offered words of caution about the missional conversation and suggested how churches can equip their people for missional living.⁴⁹ Keller included “Six Marks of a Missional Church”: 1. The church must confront society’s idols. 2. The church must contextualize skillfully and communicate in the vernacular. 3. The church must equip people in mission in every area of their lives. 4. The church must be a counterculture for the common good. 5. The church must be contextualized and expect nonbelievers, inquirers, and seekers to be involved in most aspects of the church’s life and ministry. 6. The church must practice unity.⁵⁰ The church must equip its membership to engage these elements to become a church healthy enough to start new churches. Keller added that missional churches are evangelistic, incarnational, contextual, reciprocal, and communal.⁵¹

Keller equipped the church to reach their community through organic, relational, word deploying, and active means.⁵² He said lay ministers “actively bring their Christian example and faith into the lives of their neighbors, friends, colleagues, and community.”⁵³ Lay ministers lead their communities toward gospel acceptance: Awareness, Relevance, Credibility, Trail, Commitment, and Reinforcement.⁵⁴ Those relationships progress from informal to formal states, to Christian community, and to finally sharing faith.⁵⁵

Part 8 of *Center Church* defines and describes Movement Dynamics that originates in the local church and expands to the city.⁵⁶ These movements result in organic and reproducible church planting that proclaims God’s truth and serve local communities.⁵⁷ Movements feature a compelling vision that inspires sacrifice and rewards, generous flexibility toward external organizations and relationships, and produces leaders from within.⁵⁸ Keller saw movement dynamics in a church as capable of gaining converts, generating ideas, and raising up leaders to serve the city and culture.⁵⁹ In *Center Church*’s closing chapters, Keller

⁴⁹ Ibid., 250.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 274.

⁵¹ Ibid., 256.

⁵² Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City*, 280.

⁵³ Ibid., 281.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 281–82.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 286.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 250.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 250.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 339–40.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 337.

encouraged churches to embrace the counter-cultural and counterintuitive elements that produce multiplication. First, the church must give away resources and lose control of church members, money, and assets.⁶⁰ Second, the church must give up the control and shape of their existing ministry.⁶¹ Third, churches must care for the kingdom more than any group or tribe.⁶² These sacrifices produce new ideas, leaders, churches, and in-roads to the community. These movements can saturate communities to the point where cities experience gospel influence and transformation. Church planting takes the gospel to difficult places while providing new energy and challenges for existing churches.

Keller spoke about the tension church leaders experience balancing a church's personal and structural needs. He wrote, "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."⁶³

Keller's "Movement Dynamics" gives churches a vision beyond themselves. Churches can assume that missions happen in faraway places and forget their local responsibility. City missions offers a practical and necessary vision for using church planting movements for gospel advancement and city transformation. Without a compelling missional vision, churches become isolated and exclusive. Keller's Movement Dynamics are not stand-alone mission ideas, it is the natural culmination of the thirty chapters in *Center Church* that build to city strategy. Without building a theological foundation and drawing upon historical church resources, Movement Dynamics could just be another failed strategy based on pragmatic theory and human effort. What allowed *Center Church* to become influential and effective is it places the daunting task of city missions on the sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Christ, and the leading of the Holy Spirit. Through this empowerment, churches look beyond their interests to engage in global missions for God's glory.

Conclusion

Timothy Keller's *Center Church* will be remembered as an indispensable resource for pastors to give their congregations a comprehensive understanding of the gospel, the contextual skills to participate in city missions, and the calling and equipping necessary to start church-planting movements in their communities. Keller's blend of theology, missiology, ecclesiology, and church planting

⁶⁰ Ibid., 357.

⁶¹ Ibid., 358.

⁶² Ibid., 358.

⁶³ Ibid., 249.

provides a comprehensive approach to ministry, whether someone serves as a local pastor, a missionary, a denominational employee, or in another capacity.

Keller's *Center Church* philosophy of contextualization allows for cultural engagement and biblical fidelity. At a time when some considered outreach a compromise and purity as exclusivity, Keller found a middle way to accommodate both. His ability to integrate doctrine and worldview and infuse them into the church's strategy empowered ministries to serve their communities while maintaining their identity. This method not only encouraged innovation and boldness, it also helped churches stay true to their calling and vision in an age of ministry trend-chasing. Robust theology and vision defined ministry success beyond pragmatic measurement such as budgets and attendance. In affirming churches in their calling; however, many adherents to *Center Church* contextualization found that a focus on theology and vision translated to numeric growth as well.

Center Church by Timothy Keller is an influential and valuable resource for ministry leaders who desire to live with a gospel worldview, engage in city missions, and take part in church-planting movements for the glory of God.

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