

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 churching, 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, post-modern 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

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

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

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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.

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.

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.

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

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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?

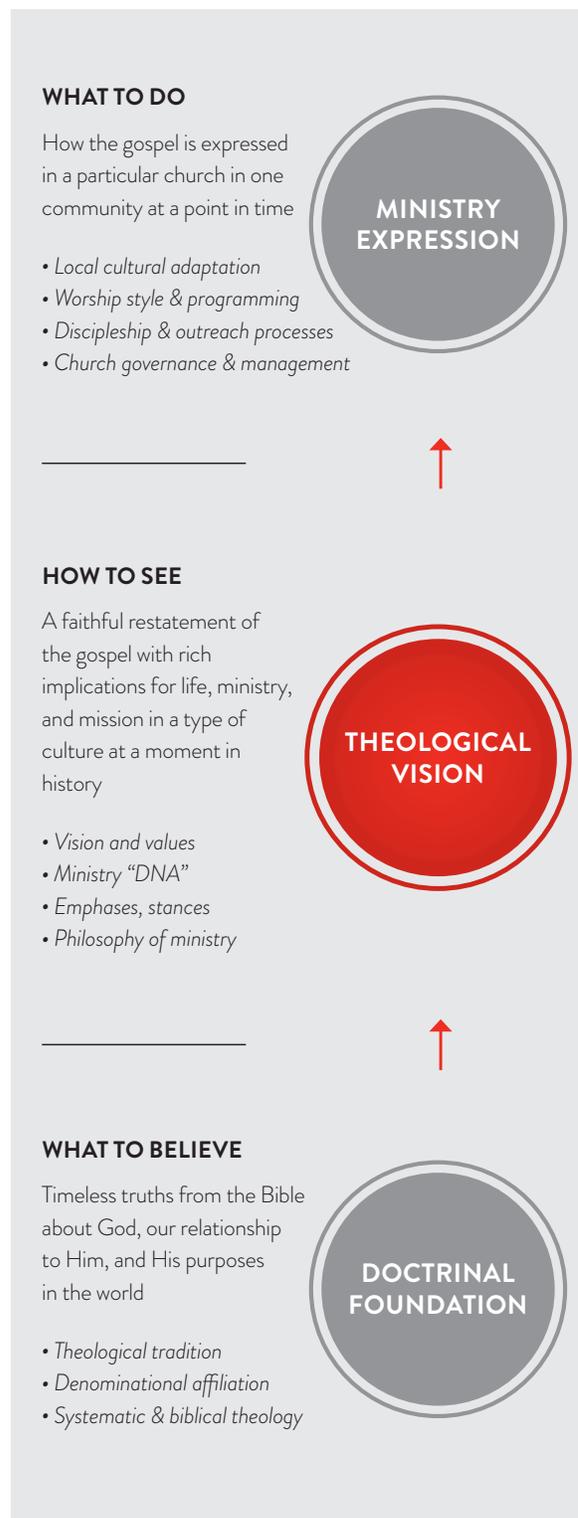
The need to explain and chart these insights became more acute as we began to plant churches — first in New York City and then in many other global cities. We wanted to help church planters learn as much as they could from our reflection and experience,

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.

A theological vision 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.

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.

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

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

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.

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 slid-

ing 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*.

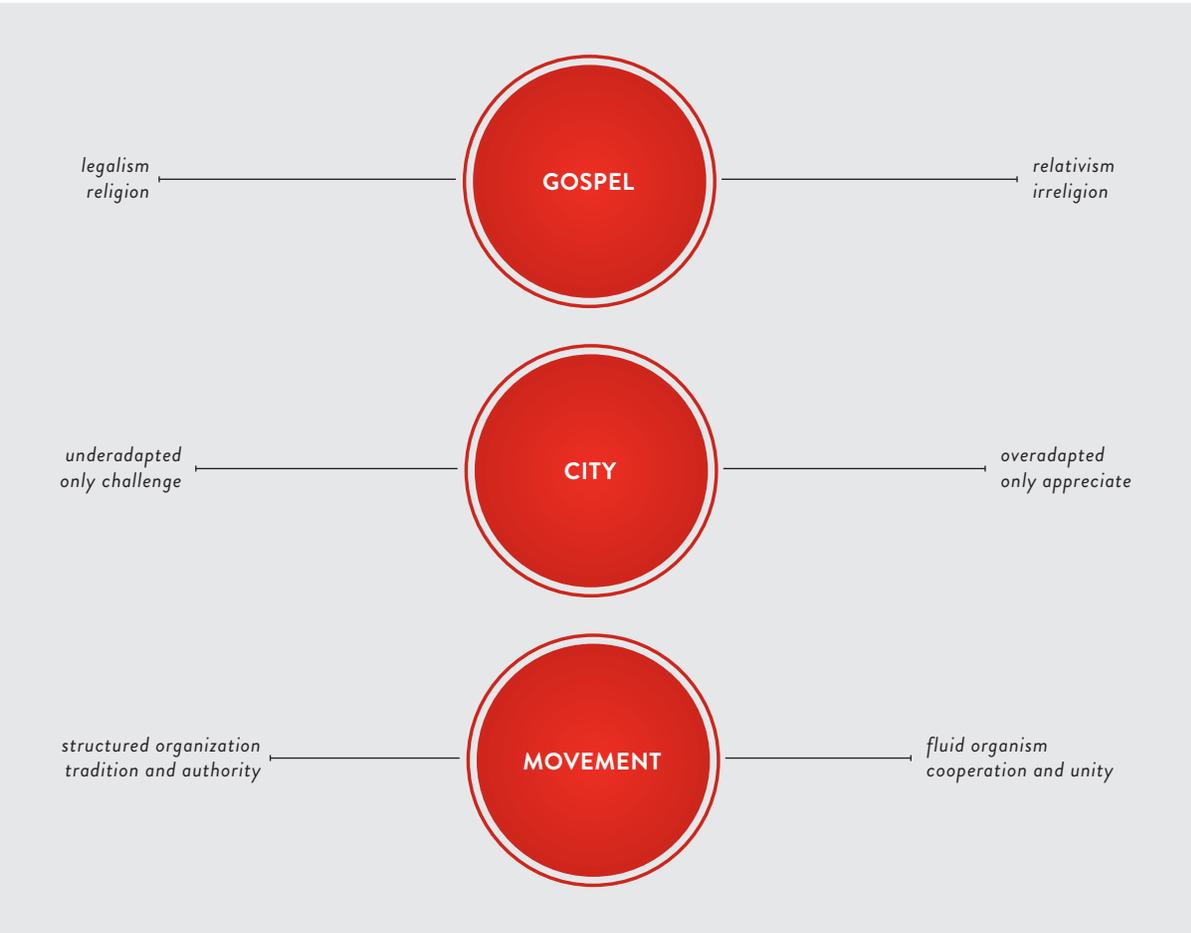
Movement. The last area of theological vision has to do with your church’s *relationships* — with its community, with its recent and deeper past, and with other churches and ministries. Richard Lints points out that one of the elements of a theological vision has to do with our understanding of tradition. 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 mindset 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 in-

fluencing 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 {pages 13–25}

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).
10. 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.
11. 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.
12. 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.
13. 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.
14. 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.