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Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry In Your City



Synopsis

Today many pastors are struggling to adapt to a post-Christian culture without abandoning orthodox theology. How do we communicate the concepts of grace and substitutionary atonement in our globalized culture and context? In *Center Church*, Timothy Keller offers challenging insights and provocative questions based on over twenty years of ministry in New York City. This book outlines a theological vision for ministry - applying classic doctrines to our time and place - organized around three core commitments:

- Gospel-centered: The gospel of grace in Jesus Christ changes everything, from our hearts to our community to the world. It completely reshapes the content, tone and strategy of all that we do.
- City-centered: With a positive approach toward our culture, we learn to affirm that cities are wonderful, strategic and underserved places for gospel ministry.
- Movement-centered: Instead of building our own tribe, we seek the prosperity and peace of our community as we are led by the Holy Spirit.

"In this important book, Tim Keller unpacks the gospel and gently but firmly reminds us that it is nonnegotiable. At the same time, he enables us to think through how we can responsibly interact with the culture, how we can - indeed, must - appreciate good things within it, and how we can firmly and faithfully apply the gospel to it." - D.A. Carson, research professor of New Testament, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

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Customer Reviews

Timothy Keller is the founder and senior pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, and the New York Times bestselling author of *The Reason for God* and *The Prodigal God*. He has

also mentored young urban church planters and pastors in New York and other cities through Redeemer City to City, which has helped launch over 200 churches in 35 global cities to date.

“If you want a philosophy of ministry, I’m not your guy. I’ve written them. I’ve even assigned and graded them. I don’t like most of them, though. Some are theological, but don’t tell me much about ministry. Some are programmatic, and end up becoming too prescriptive. Neither is helpful. What we need, according to Tim Keller, is middleware. Middleware is like the operating system on your computer. It’s neither the hardware (like theology), nor is it the application (the programs). In the church, this middleware -- a theological vision for ministry, really -- is more practical than doctrinal beliefs alone, but more theological than “how-to” steps for ministry. It is, it turns out, exactly what we need, and it’s what Keller aims to deliver in his tome *Center Church*. Yes, it’s a tome. The book is almost 400 pages, and the audiobook is almost 23 hours long. It’s formatted like a textbook with lots of sidebars, and some tables and sidebars. As Mike Wittmer writes, “The only thing it’s missing is a few pictures of U.S. Presidents, and I’d be back in high school.” (The sidebars are one reason why the print version is superior to the audiobook or the ebook format. There’s no real way for the sidebars to have the same flow on a Kindle, much less an audiobook.) The book delivers exactly what you’d expect from Tim Keller: a scholarly but practical look at ministry. The book is broken into three sections: Gospel, City, and Movement. First, he begins with the gospel, helping us think carefully about what it is and what it isn’t. He also describes how the gospel renews the church. Chapter 6, “The Work of Gospel Renewal,” is worth the price of the book itself for any pastor who wants to see the church revived. Second, Keller writes on the city. Keller describes what it means to contextualize our ministries appropriately, and then gives us a basic understanding of urban theology. Keller is the best thing to happen to urban theology since Ray Bakke, who wrote *The Urban Christian* years ago. Keller makes a compelling case for the importance of ministry in the urban core, without devaluing the significance of ministry elsewhere. He then deals with the complex topic of the church’s relationship to culture. Entire books have been written on this topic, but Keller bravely tackles it, providing a good synthesis of the various views. Keller reminds me of why I love cities, and why I’m glad to be pastoring in a city like Toronto. Finally, Keller writes on movement. The Church, he writes, is both an organism and an organization. It requires that we join God on mission, that we integrate a number of ministry fronts, and that we act as an organized organism. We need, he writes, more than sound doctrine, although sound doctrine is necessary. We need more than a magic-bullet program that will reach people. We

need something in the middle: a theological vision that enables us to communicate the gospel to our time and place. "You can do this ministry with God's help," Keller writes, "so give it all you've got. You can't do this ministry without God's help -- so be at peace." I can't tell you how much I appreciated this book. It's meaty, but it re-energized me at many points. When Keller writes about church planting, for instance, he both inspired me and encouraged me, and made me want to sign up to be a church planter all over again. He has a knack for communicating complex information in a pastorally helpful way. This is one of those books that I'll be reading again. It's going to go on the shelf of books that are consulted often, because it covers so much material in a substantive, helpful way. I did have a couple of mild criticisms. Keller likes finding the via media, the middle way. This is often helpful, but not always. Also, I also found that this book had a heavily edited feel. It occasionally seemed to lack cohesiveness, which is perhaps understandable given all the ground it covers. Still, it seemed to be missing some of Keller's voice. I could be imagining this, but it felt that way. That being said, this book is gold. A few of Keller's articles have had a profound influence on my life. Imagine, then, almost 400 pages of such material. If you're in pastoral ministry, or if you are interested in a theological vision of the church, or any number of related topics such as church planting and cultural engagement, then this book is a must. Buy the print edition if you can, and refer to it often. You won't be sorry.

I have been reading books about the church for almost thirty years now. Most of the best material is being churned out by Mark Dever and the boys at 9Marks. Tim Keller's, Center Church is a welcome guest in the growing list of books on ecclesiology. Keller sets out to communicate one central message which is summed up in the subtitle: Doing Balanced Gospel-Centered Ministry in the City. Center Church is encyclopedic in nature. It covers every subject conceivable and is a helpful tool in every pastors prospective tool chest. The discussion about gospel contextualization (chapter 7) is deeply encouraging and highly instructive. The author notes, "Contextualization is not - as is often argued - 'giving people what they want to hear.' Rather, it is giving people the Bible's answers, which they may not at all want to hear, to questions about life that people in their particular time and place are asking, in language and forms they can comprehend, and through appeals and arguments with force they can feel, even if they reject them.." Keller warns against the temptation to use contextualization as a clever means of compromise (which I find many pastors doing). He adds, "The call to contextualize the gospel has been - and still often is - used as a cover for religious syncretism. This means not adapting the gospel to a particular culture, but rather surrendering the

gospel entirely and morphing Christianity into a different religion by overadapting it to an alien worldview."Center Church is filled with helpful instruction on doing gospel ministry in the city. It is a long read but worth plodding through for the treasures along the way.Highly recommended for pastors who love the gospel!

I liked that the book was theologically sound and thoughtful. Not that I agree with everything that was said, but at least the part where I disagree were thought through theologically. Keller is a veteran in applying biblical theology and biblical ecclesiology into an actual church setting that is part of a bigger picture of the Gospel movement in a major city of the world. As a pastor in Los Angeles, much of this consideration helped me to reflect on my city. One of my hangups is that it seems that the goal is to change the city for one's or a generation. Not that I don't want to do that, but it seems to be a bit of a smaller goal than what the Bible lays out.I recommend this book to all pastors and disciple makers who seek to make disciples through the local church for the good of the broader world.I gave it a five star rating because it challenged me, sharpened me theologically, helped me to think through how to apply the Bible's truth in the context of a church in the city, and because even though I disagree with some small points, it seems to be one of the better books to have a conversation in thinking through church leadership.

Tim Keller can do no wrong. A textbook to be savored for every 21st century church leader! Take your time with this one. You might miss something. It's not a guide book to clone the modern church, but a useful and practical reminder of how each church has a contextual location and history, which can afford it's leaders opportunities to share the Gospel, in a balanced community, with balanced leadership.It really is the size of a High School TEXTBOOK!!! Don't let the scare you! It's informative and readable. You'll find yourself stopping to reflect and apply caveats along the way. That's a good thing. It's like buying a semester course in one text from a knowledgeable, erudite pastor of pastors, who often provides cohort workshops for church planters, who fly in from all over the world, with great long term success. I've witness some of the students of the Center Church educational planting process. I love this book!

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