

<https://9marks.org/review/center-church-doing-balanced-gospel-centered-ministry-your-city/>
[Review](#)

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I was recently on a conference call with a group of ten pastors who are all members of my theological “tribe,” as we’re calling them nowadays. Each of us took turns updating one another, and I mentioned that I was in the process of reviewing Timothy Keller’s *Center Church*. Would they pray for me? The conversation turned to Keller’s overall ministry program. One brother said that *Center Church* was “one of the best two or three books” he had ever read “besides the Bible.” A second brother explained that reading Keller sometimes made him want to applaud, and sometimes made him want “to throw the book out the window.”



Everyone had *something* to say.

I don’t know what church circles you travel in, but this cellular brouhaha mimicked the chatter I have heard for years concerning Keller. Many church leaders treat him as the bee’s knees, a Protestant with *ex cathedra* potentiality. Others grimace and wince. To be clear, the wincers wince as you would with a teammate and not someone playing for the other side. But it is our disagreements with the ones closest to us that most quickly boil the pot and rattle the lid.

Center Church is Keller’s *magnum opus*. It offers a textbook summary of this amazingly gifted pastor’s philosophy of ministry. If you have been hearing or reading Keller for any length of time, you will have encountered its themes. But this book provides the most careful and comprehensive presentation of Keller’s views I have encountered. You can tell he has humbly learned from his critics, and moderated his views accordingly. For instance, where Keller once used the unintentionally misleading phrase “transforming culture” in reference to the church’s mission, I don’t recall him using it in this book. Furthermore, I genuinely mean it as a compliment when I say that it is as easy to read as your seventh-grade science textbook. Definitions are in bold-face. The arguments proceed logically over two-columned pages. And helpful summaries and charts are placed throughout.

Still, why the range of reactions to Keller’s theological vision? More than once conversations about Keller—I’m serious—have left me humming, “How do you solve a problem like Tim Keller?” as the priggish old nuns did with Fraulein Maria. Yes, I suppose that means I’m the old nun.

It is tempting to offer a Kellersque “third way” for viewing Keller, a triangulated Keller for narrowing the space between the Keller critics and enthusiasts. To read Keller, after all, is to be trained in the art of the Aristotelian mean. This is his m.o.

True to form, *Center Church* has three sections, each of which offers church leaders a center place to plant their feet on a road between two ditches.

- The “Gospel” section, which examines the nature of the gospel, sets life-transforming grace in between religion and irreligion, legalism and relativism.

- The “City” center, which is a study of contextualization, can be located in between affirming and confronting culture.
- And the “Movement” center, which considers the church itself, locates a healthy missional church in between organism and institution, leaning slightly on the organism side.

Perhaps, in like fashion, we should search for a balanced view of the balancer himself?

Let me attempt just that by putting my own cards on the table: I think Keller is a gift to evangelical churches for whom we can thank God, and he has something that his critics should hear. And I think that Keller’s emphases leave certain imbalances in place that his fans fail to recognize, but that they would do well to avoid. In fact, I will spend most of my time with the latter since unpacking disagreements—I trust the reader understands—always takes more care, like pulling antique china from newspaper wrapping.

But here is what I am afraid of. I don’t want the critics to read my criticisms, feel affirmed in their pre-judgments, and fail to benefit from the book. In fact, they might be the ones who will benefit from it the most. All that to say, I hope readers will perceive me to be not a friendly critic but a lovingly critical friend, with the preponderance of my regard located in the noun. And I hope further that my critiques will be received in the spirit of respect and honor in which they are intended.

THE BEST OF MISSIONAL THINKING

Keller represents the best of “missional” thinking, which is a particular way of viewing the nature and work of the church that is suited to the pluralistic cityscape of the post-Christian West. The topics *de jour* for missional church practitioners like Keller are contextualization and good works. They root these conversations in theology, no doubt. God is a sending God, and the gospel produces good deeds. But these emphases are contextually driven. They result from looking into the sneering faces of our over-marketed urban neighbors and finding that any mention of Jesus’ name yields mockery and the political growl of an animal whose turf is threatened. So forget knocking on front doors like our Christian grandparents did. Forget inviting them to unassuming church services like our parents did. Instead, put on the native attire of city dwellers. Get into their world. Do good works. And win them by blessing them. That’s what the incarnate Jesus did, after all.

At its best, then, missional thinking is about helping the saints share the good news and love their neighbors; at worst it is the insecure immigrant kid who wants to be mainstream. Keller, as I say, is its best. Yet in all its varieties, missional thinking treats the church’s greatest challenge as knowing how to establish an interface with the world in order to reach the world. The book does not say this, but I believe that this is the primary problem that *Center Church*’s paradigmatic church is trying to solve: how can we reach the world? That is the revivalist in Keller (a label he seems to own), and, as I will suggest in a moment, many of the answers he gives to this question are good.

TWO HORIZONS, NOT THREE

Still, if I might presume to speak for a 9Marks perspective—if such a thing exists—I would say that we remain stubbornly convicted that “How can we reach the world?” is not the first question a church should ask. The greatest challenge for the people of God today is the greatest challenge that the people of God faced in the Garden, in the wilderness, in the land of

Israel, in exile, in the early church, and in the last twenty centuries: how can we be faithful to our saving Lord and his Word?

This brings us to the first of two areas where I believe that *Center Church* should be read with caution. More than Keller probably realizes, *Center Church* encourages pastors to build their churches from the boardroom table of pragmatism.

In the book's opening pages, Keller invites us into a conversation about how one should evaluate a ministry. The "how to" church books say that churches should be evaluated by the standard of "success." The biblical church books respond that churches should be evaluated according to the standard of "faithfulness." Yet Keller urges readers to take a third way, the way of evaluating and building a ministry according to "fruitfulness."

He illustrates this point with the picture of a minister who leaves an exurban church for an urban one but finds that his old methods just don't work in an urban setting. If this minister is a success-oriented guy, he will read a "how to" book. If he is a "faithfulness" guy, he will conclude that "these urban folk are just plain hard-hearted," that he is being faithful, and that there is nothing more to do. Keller, with his third-way instincts, does not like either option. This minister should recognize that he is called to be fruitful, and that there *is* more he can do. He should start thinking contextually.

Yet before we go to contextualization, what should we say about Keller's foundations—that churches should measure themselves by "fruitfulness" more than "faithfulness" or "success"?

There is a tilted-head sense in which I agree. As I heard him say elsewhere, there are ministers who hide behind the idea of "faithfulness" as they stay true to the Word and sound doctrine, but fail to take the risks and make the sacrifices necessary to bear fruit. They are like the man in Jesus' parable, Keller has observed, who buries his one talent instead of doing the hard work of being fruitful with it. Churches *should* be driven by the desire to bear fruit (and I'd even say that churches should evaluate ministerial calling according to fruitfulness). One pastor on the conference call helpfully wrote me afterward,

I feel like I am encountering more and more young guys who are not working as hard as they should, not seeing a lot of things happen in their church, but who feel satisfied because they are faithful. Granted, I am a pretty driven guy and am always pushing for more, but I just feel like every minister should possess a godly ambition to bear much fruit. So when I read Keller's comments about "fruitfulness" it really resonated with me.

Framed in this fashion, that is exactly right, and, to read Keller charitably, this is all he means to say. A pastor's decision to make faithfulness his primacy metric should not sate his appetite for fruit. His stomach should still rumble. Indeed, the prayer life of a faithful minister should look like Bugs Bunny's [tasmanian devil](#), a whirling blur of ferocity that swallows everything in its path.

The trouble is, Keller mixes up his categories here by pitting faithfulness against fruitfulness. Faithfulness is a measure of what we *do*, while fruitfulness and success are both a measure of the *results*. In other words, where Keller sees three horizons (success, faithfulness, fruitfulness), I only see two, the horizons of *activity* and *results*. One might notice then that he leaves unexplained how "fruitfulness" is anything other than a biblical gloss on "success"—a distinction with no difference. Which means, Keller, whether he intends to or not, has just told

church leaders to look firstly at the results of their ministries, and then to adjust their activities accordingly. And that seems to put him one or two clicks closer than 9Marks to an old Italian writer who said the end justifies the means.

Let's go back to his illustration of the minister who has moved from the exurban to the urban setting. The man *might* be right in thinking that urban folk are hard hearted and that there is nothing more for him to do other than to keep preaching the Word; or he *might* be lazy and foolish and failing to do certain things the Bible would call him to do.

But if the latter is the case, the point is, *he is not being faithful*. The point, again, is that *faithfulness to God's Word requires him to do more than he is presently doing*. So it is with the man who buries his talent. The moral of that story, I take it, is that he is not being faithful with his stewardship.

So it is with any labor of love. A man might find himself unable to penetrate his embittered wife's heart because he is a clod and does not know how to listen to her or his counselors; or it may be that her heart simply cannot be penetrated. What we can positively say is, the husband's task is to ask himself and others, "Am I doing everything I can do to be faithful?"

This is the nature of dealing with the hearts of others, which cannot finally be reached with anything human. How then can we measure by results (fruit/success) when the results are beyond our control?

And so it is with church leaders. The hearts of the saved and unsaved alike are beyond a pastor's reach, and so the final evaluative question must always be, "Am I doing everything I can do to be faithful?" Now, if Keller wants to argue that there is more that pastors should do to be faithful—say, contextualize—that is what he should argue. But he should not prioritize fruitfulness over faithfulness.

Here then, positively, is what I want Keller critics and enthusiasts alike—but especially the critics—to get from Keller's (unfortunate) prioritization of fruitfulness: Don't be thoughtless. Don't assume that one church or one city is just like another. Don't give yourself a free pass by thinking you can keep doing exactly what you've always done. If you have multiple children, you know how this works. Each one has their own love language and methods of motivation, and you have to adjust your care and instruction accordingly. In the same way, pastor, be thoughtful about your particular community and your particular church.

Critically, here is what I do *not* want Keller critics and enthusiasts alike—but especially the enthusiasts—to get from Keller's (unfortunate) demotion of faithfulness: fruitfulness (or outward success) is how to measure a worthy ministry. It is not. God will not say, "Well done, my good and *fruitful* servant. My—look at all you've done!" He will simply ask whether you have maximized the resources he has given you. Have you been faithful to do everything *that his Word* has asked you to do?

Building churches requires pastors to keep their eyes on the horizons of activities and results, to be sure, but the difference comes down to how we relate the two horizons. The voice of pragmatism says, "Do whatever it takes within certain boundaries to get results. That way you know you've done a good job." A better approach, I believe, begins with the charge, "Do this because God says to do it, whether or not you see results." More must be said, to be sure, but we have to begin there.

Now, you will find nothing in Keller's book that encourages pastors to compromise on faithfulness. But my concern is that his criteria for evaluating success tempt an individual in this way, even if Keller himself would not.

Let's circle back and connect this to the missional program. The overarching question at stake is whether mission/outreach is your controlling ambition, the umbrella under which everything else fits. Or is faithfulness/obedience your controlling ambition and categorical umbrella? That is, should Christians ambitiously pursue the mission and fruitfulness as one aspect of being faithful (9Marks), or does the mission call us, among other things, to faithfulness (missional)? Keller and the missional movement, like the seeker-sensitive movement of the eighties and the revivalists of earlier decades, effectively say the latter. They will affirm the importance of faithfulness, but—you might have noticed—it is a faithfulness “among other things” that accomplishes the mission. Among other things, church leaders must have business savvy, said the seeker generation. Among other things, Christians must be culturally astute, says the missional generation. These “among other things” are the *keys* that unlock the dynamite box of growth.[1]

THE KEY TO MINISTRY?

That brings us to a second broad area where *Center Church* should be read with caution: what Keller does with contextualization. Part of a biblically faithful ministry, Keller rightly observes, involves the pastor in recognizing the mixed nature of culture (Rom. 1 and 2), exercising a certain flexibility toward culture (1 Cor. 9), and recognizing that different cultures have different theological pressure points (1 Cor. 1), which can be leveraged for apologetic purposes (ch. 9). Contextualization, that is to say, is biblical. You will find no dispute from me here.

The problem arises when one's approach to contextualization is set upon pragmatic foundations. When you evaluate your ministry by fruit as much if not more as by faithfulness, your approach to contextualization can stumble in at least one of two ways.

First, you can emphasize contextualization too much, as indicated by treating it as the key to success. Keller tries to separate himself from the writers who tell pastors “to do church through the perspective of a key concept” (16). But he cannot help but do the same when it comes to contextualization: “Skill in contextualization is one of the keys to effective ministry today” (90). Or again: “To the degree a ministry is overadapted or underadapted to a culture, it loses life-changing power” (24). Or later: “Only this kind of [missional] church has any chance in the non-Christian West” (273). Do you want to open the dynamite box in your ministry? Adapt culturally. Bang!

The trouble is, all this is overstated at best, and untrue at worst. If a pastor wants to quote from his city's arts district rag, all the better, I suppose. But he has to know that he is not going to unlock any exploding boxes of fruit that way. The key to a fruitful ministry is *always* the work of the Word and the Spirit. We plant and water. Then it is over to God to decide about growth. God might have appointed a pastor for a visibly fruitful church or not. But why has contextualization suddenly become so much more essential to ministry today than it has been at any other point since Adam and Eve were evicted from the Garden? That question is never really considered.

So is contextualization biblical? Yes, and church leaders should no more overlook its importance than they should overlook the need to be polite when visiting someone's home.

But if you begin to tell me that being polite in someone else's home is "the key" to friendship, and that it will have "life-changing power" in relationships, I will begin to wonder about your priorities and what you are missing.

FIRST "A," THEN "B"

Second, when you give biblical contextualization a weight that it was not meant to carry, you increase the risk of over-accommodating the culture—more than would be the case with less pragmatic foundations. And I believe that Keller may be at greater risk of this than he recognizes.

After looking at the biblical data for contextualization, Keller draws out a tidy formulation for how to contextualize, which depends on a distinction between "A" doctrines and "B" doctrines. But let me present him in his own words:

When we enter a culture, we should be looking for two kinds of beliefs. The first are what I call 'A' beliefs, which are beliefs people already hold that, because of God's common grace, roughly correspond to some parts of biblical teaching. Because of their 'A' beliefs, people are predisposed to find plausible some of the Bible's teaching (which we may call 'A' doctrines). However we will also find 'B' beliefs...beliefs that lead listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible or overtly offensive. 'B' beliefs contradict Christian truth claims directly at points we may call 'B' doctrines. In this first stage, it is important to identify the 'A' beliefs—the wisdom and witness to the truth that God, by his common grace, has granted to the culture. Remember that 'A' beliefs differ from culture to culture, so we need to listen carefully. (123)

Keller strikes the *center* church balance between affirming and confronting culture, then, by beginning with the "A" doctrines, and using them as "jumping-off points" for moving to "B" beliefs and doctrines:

It is important to learn how to distinguish a culture's 'A' doctrines from its 'B' doctrines because *knowing which are which provides the key* [that word again] *to compelling confrontation*. This happens when we base our argument for 'B' doctrines *directly on* the 'A' doctrines. (124, emphasis original)

Like floating stones across a river by placing them on a raft of logs, Keller says, "we need to 'float' 'B' doctrines on top of 'A' doctrines" (124). The classic proof text for this methodology, he continues, is Acts 17. Paul affirms the pagan writer who says that God is the source of all life. That is the "A" doctrine. But then, using this point of agreement, Paul shows the Athenians how this starting point leads to the very doctrines they despise (124-25).

Now, once again, Keller critics and enthusiasts—especially the critics—have something to learn here. Really, Keller is drawing from the common sense rules of good communication: if you want to build a relationship, start with areas of commonality. I think it is perfectly sensible, perhaps astute, for pastors to look for ways to apply this advice. One can do this with non-Christians and Christians alike. "You want freedom, eh? Has the sin you've been giving yourself over to made you feel free? No? I know something that will..."

So do not misunderstand me: there is a time and place for Keller's A-to-B approach, especially since this seems to be a reasonable inference from Acts 17. But here—dare I say—is the key: you must recognize what you are doing and even be leery of it. You are subjecting

your explanation of the gospel to a cultural perspective. You are choosing to limit it. You are taking the full-orbed truth of God's word and immersing it in one stream of human tradition and rationality. And with every step you take toward embedding the gospel in a cultural perspective, you take one step toward a reductionistic gospel, potentially putting other aspects of Christian doctrine and discipleship slightly out of reach. Not only, as you begin to make these kinds of calculations ("What's "A"? What's "B"?), some "B"s may look beyond the pale. You will be tempted to think they will sink the raft, so it is best not to say them.

In other words, ministers can easily over-apply the lessons of Acts 17. It is one thing to start an evangelistic talk and linger in the "A" doctrines for just a few moments (Acts 17); it is another thing to treat Acts 17 as a first principle for all of ministry.

To this, the communitarian postmodern responds, "But we can't help but see things from our cultural perspective!" And the missional Christian quips, "And didn't Jesus incarnate himself into a particular culture?!"

Yes, yes, very well. But several thoughts: First, we should not be as enamored with the distances between cultures as the postmodern mindset demands. It has God-toppling purposes for exaggerating those distances. Don't let the fancy French names of their favorite philosophers intimidate you. We all have one head and father in Adam, and all the jabber about cultural difference can subtly make us forget the deep unity we all share.

Second, the example of the incarnation is indeed used to encourage Christians to give to one another when in need (2 Cor. 8) and to put one another's interests before their own (Phil. 2:1-11). But can anyone point me to a text that connects the incarnation and contextualization? Or the incarnation and the foregrounding of "A" doctrines? Is there a text that likens the separation between Creator and creature to the separation between cultures?

I don't know it. But no matter. We can all agree that Christ condescendingly loved us by stooping down to us in the incarnation, and we should all do the same, in some sense, with our lives. Still, keep in mind that Jesus put on flesh and drew near *so that* he could preach a gospel message that invariably contains both A-doctrines and B-doctrines.

And the gospel does not divide so neatly between "A" and "B." It is always both. It is always *for* the world and *against* the world. It is always a message of freedom and enslavement, salvation and judgment, no matter which biblical formulation of the gospel you chose. There is a sense in which Jesus refuses to condescend to our cultural preferences and categories and simply gets in our face with "A" and "B."

Consider, for instance, the gospel formulation "Jesus is Lord." Packed into that proposition is a sword-bearing Lord to whom we owe repentance—certainly a "B" doctrine by any standard. Which is precisely why Paul does not rely upon *natural* devices, such as the common sense rules of communication. He knows that the power of conversion depends on something *supernatural*: "For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds" (2 Cor. 10:4).

Third, Keller is right—culture is changing, and we need to be aware of that. But what he would call the "post-Christian" nature of Western culture, I believe, means that an increasing measure of spiritual blindness is settling onto the West. If everyone is stuck inside a cultural perspective, our Western non-Christian neighbors are increasingly stuck inside one that cannot see the things of God, and for which the "B" doctrines will increasingly feel irrational

and dangerous. One might even say there are fewer and fewer “A” doctrines. Yet if I build my raft on “A” doctrines, does that not mean I’m going to need to bend further and further to reach the culture, that I’m going to have to sink my gospel ever deeper into the anti-God “perspective” of our times?

At the very least, I am tempted to think that growing spiritual blindness in a culture means that “contextualization,” insofar as it relies on affirming points of natural affinity, is less likely to “work” for ministry purposes than in times and places less given over to spiritual blindness.

Keller may well agree with everything I just said, and I believe that knowing the difference between a culture’s “A” and “B” doctrines *can* sometimes serve apologetic purposes with non-Christians or help the cause of pastoral application with one’s own congregation members. If you are oblivious to your culture, you are probably a bad pastor, just as you are probably a bad husband if you don’t know what makes your own wife tick. We need a dash of Keller’s contextual seasoning in our ministerial stew.

But I remain leery, probably more than Keller, about the temptation for many church leaders to confuse the seasoning for the stew. For every fundamentalistic church which Keller might say is too brazen with its “B”s, I feel like there are seven who have accommodated themselves too far toward the culture and become “safe places” where non-Christians are happy to go and therefore find little need to go. Both Keller and 9Marks want to guard against the errors of moving too far toward accommodation or confrontation, but our “centers” may be in different spots. That is, we feel the opposing threats differently.

As such, I feel more inclined to urge ministers not to be the insecure immigrant kid who just wants to belong (again, I don’t think Keller is). Christianity’s educated classes can easily succumb to a sycophancy toward high and hipster culture. But we must not downplay the “B’s” because they will cause a scene at the dinner party or the coffee shop. A ministry that never leads with sin or judgment, or a ministry that seldom, if ever, mentions cultural bugbears, is a ministry that has succumbed to a limited, reductionistic gospel more than it realizes.

Furthermore, don’t ever treat some biblical “perspectives” or “doctrines” as beyond the pale. Yes, some of them *will* sink the raft. But that is why you must rely on God, and not on your cultural calculations, to convert the heart.

All this is why, in my mind, the primary thing church leaders need to learn about today and in every age is the all-important quotient of faithfulness to God’s Word.

YOU SHOULD READ THIS BOOK

It is well past time to change the channel. Am I saying you should not read the book? No. In fact, you should. It is brilliant in many ways.

My advice, essentially, is to rip out the introduction (the fruitfulness stuff) and maybe chapter 10 (the “A” to “B” stuff) which sets up chapters 1 to 30 as the key to successful ministry, and read chapters 1 to 30 because most of them are really, really good. In fact, the priggish “we’re more faithful” types should especially read it because we could learn to be more conscientious, personally and culturally.

THE GOSPEL CENTER

As I said earlier, *Center Church*'s three sections each offer a "third way" in between two imbalances. The Gospel section pushes a life-transforming grace that is set in between religion and irreligion, legalism and relativism. To get there,

- We need the corporate focus of a "diachronic" or narrational rendering of the gospel (creation, fall, redemption, restoration) and the individual focus of the "synchronic" or systematic account of the gospel (God, humanity, Christ, faith).
- We need to be able to talk and preach about the gospel through any of the rich tapestry of themes that we find in the Bible (home/exile, covenant, kingdom, etc.).
- We must preach and pray for gospel revival in every area of life in a way that recognizes the formative role of the church.

I could list a host of helpful bullets. There is much rich material in this first section that should become part of the basic vocabulary of evangelicals.

THE CITY CENTER

Section 2, called "The City," deals with contextualization. Though I don't agree with the particular balance that Keller strikes between accommodation and confrontation, as I have said, surely he is right to say that church leaders must know how to do both.

Next door to *astounding* if not actually inside the house is Keller's synthesis of the various schools of thought for relating the church and the world, from two kingdoms to neo-Anabaptist, to transformationalist, to relevant. The chart on page 231 brings it all together, and helps him (in the previous chapter) draw out the strengths and weakness of each school of thought. Picture, if you will, an x/y diagram, in which the x-axis is a spectrum of cultural engagement and the y-axis is a spectrum of common grace. The point is that one can veer too far in either direction along both axes—too much or too little room for common grace; too much confrontation or accommodation of culture.

I suppose Keller's final conclusion is right: that we should always aspire to the center of both axes, while recognizing that different seasons and personal convictions will place people on different places of those axes. Some leaders are better at playing the accommodating good cop, and others are better at playing the confrontational bad cop.

Yet I am probably more convinced than Keller is that evangelical America, on the whole, could presently use a dose of fundamentalist rigidity, a little more steel in its spine. As a movement, we evangelicals trust heavily in the converting power of the gospel's inclusive elements: "Let me show you how much I'm like you so that you trust me and get converted. Our church is a *safe place* for you." We have a harder time seeing that the gospel's exclusive elements also have converting power: "Our church is a *distinct* place with a different kind of aroma, where our love for one another points you to our messiah. But you cannot have a full share in us until you repent since that very love which you want is born of repentance."

Keller surely sees the need for both, as in his discussion of relational integrity which calls Christians both to be like and unlike their neighbors (282-83). And he knows that a line needs to be drawn between church and world, so he calls for church discipline and fencing the table. But the overall emphasis of the book and this second section especially leans heavily toward the gospel's inclusive elements. The missional mindset, after all, emphasizes the incarnational

“going in.” It does not so much emphasize the “come out from them and be separate” (2 Cor. 6:17). That’s not necessarily a critique since no one book needs to say everything. But it is a call for the reader to *balance* Keller’s book with something that emphasizes not just the lowering of fences but the raising of them. There is a time and season for both, as Keller knows.

MOVEMENT CENTER

Now, at the risk of contradicting myself, Keller’s third and final section entitled “Movement,” which seeks to strike the balance between church as organism and church as structured organization, makes me wonder if the 9Marks squad might not lean a little too far toward the exclusive side of things. If I am Keller reading the 9Marks oeuvre, I’m probably going to say, “Yeah, those 9Marks guys helpfully emphasize the institutional elements like membership and discipline, but you should probably supplement your reading with something on the organic and movement side of things”—like this third section.

Where it is especially helpful is in the practical guidance given for engaging with neighbors, for connecting people to the city (through mercy and justice), and for connecting people to the culture (through the integration of faith and work). I’m not sure I agree with everything he says in this third section, such as the need to “use highly skilled arts in worship”; and he lays more emphasis on planting new churches than on revitalizing old ones, which is a 9Marks passion. But the overall vision painted by Keller in this last section is a wonderful and well-rounded vision of a church in its community—what he calls a gospel ecosystem—that tries to “avoid the twin errors of trying to re-create a Christian society and withdrawing from society into the spiritual realm” (379).

This may be where Keller is at his strongest. So often, our strengths are joined together with our weaknesses. Keller’s A-to-B contextualizing program, which largely builds on accommodation and common grace, may tempt some pastors toward over-accommodation, but it also makes Keller the “public theologian” *par excellence*, well suited to equipping the saints for encountering culture at work, in government, through the arts, and so forth. Hence, I have benefitted immensely from Keller’s books on justice and marriage, even initiating reading them with others; and I look forward to reading his book on the doctrine of work.

CONCLUSION

In the final analysis, missional writers like Keller paint a wonderful picture of the local church as a proleptic sign of God’s salvation. What the missional storyline tends to underemphasize is that the baptismal moat surrounding the local church signifies not only salvation, but judgment. The very existence of the local church, at once inviting and exclusive, is a shadow-like sign of God’s salvation *and* judgment.

In spite of these imbalances, Keller’s book is in many ways a remarkable piece of work, whose concrete, wise, and gospel-promoting counsel will benefit readers. I have spent more time in criticism, yes, but that is in part because its many virtues will flower up more visibly to anyone who reads it, as other reviewers have made apparent. Ironically, I am inclined to think it will prove most beneficial to that camp of readers who recognize its limitations.

[1] In his new edition of *Brothers, We Are Not Professionals*, John Piper reflects on how ministerial professionalism has changed since he first wrote the book:

Among younger pastors, the talk is less about therapeutic and managerial professionalization, and more about communication or contextualization.

The language of “professionalization” is seldom used in these regards, but there is quiet pressure felt by many pastors: *Be as good as the professional media folks, especially the cool anti-heroes and the most subtle comedians.*

This is not the overstated professionalism of the three-piece suit and the power offices of the upper floors, but the understated professionalism of torn blue jeans and the savvy inner ring.

This professionalism is not learned in pursuing an MBA, but by being in the know about the ever-changing entertainment and media world.

This is the professionalization of ambience, and tone, and idiom, and timing, and banter. It is more intuitive and less taught. More style and less technique. More feel and less force.

Some of this criticism potentially applies to Keller, or at least to the direction taken by his students. He advises them to “be characterized by CQ (cultural quotient),” his adaptation of IQ or EQ (intelligence or emotional quotient), which is helpful in one sense. But their takeaway is to fixate on ambience, tone, idiom, timing, style, and feel, as if *that* will make all the difference.