

To Transform a City

How do you know if you're reaching a city?

Tim Keller | posted 3/07/2011

Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, recently spoke to New York City church leaders about something that concerns them all: reaching the city for Christ. Leadership editor Marshall Shelley was there, and after you read this article, read Shelley's interview with Tim Keller and Bill Hybels "[Leadership in the City.](http://movementday.com/604162.ihtml)" This article is a condensed version of Keller's remarks. The complete talk can be found at <http://movementday.com/604162.ihtml>

It takes a movement to reach a city. Reaching an entire city takes more than having some effective churches even having a burst of revival energy and new converts.

Today, in almost every city in the world, some churches are growing. Some may be growing rapidly, and it's right to feel that God is doing great things in those churches. People are coming to Christ.

But it's another thing to ask: Is God reaching that city? If a few churches are growing, for instance, but the overall number of Christians is flat, is that city being reached for God?

Church growth often happens through "church reconfiguration," people from less vital or hurting churches going to more vigorous congregations. Now this isn't bad, because often in those more vigorous churches, Christians are being more well deployed. Perhaps a strong Christian woman is going to a hurting church—she loves her church, but there are fights and difficulties—and she can't bring her non-Christian friends to that church because the atmosphere is so unhealthy. So finally, with a heavy heart, she leaves and goes to the growing church in town, where she brings a non-Christian friend who finds faith in Christ at that church. That's all good. And yet, is that reaching a city? No.

What it takes to reach a city is a city-wide gospel movement, which means the number of Christians across the city is growing faster than the population, and therefore, a growing percentage of the people of that city are connecting with gospel-centered churches and are finding faith in Jesus Christ. That will eventually have an impact on the whole life of the city. That's what I mean by a city-wide gospel movement.

A city-wide gospel movement is an organic thing. It's an energy unleashed across not only the city but across the different denominations, and therefore, there's no one church, no one organization, no one leader in charge of it all. It's bigger than that. It's the Holy Spirit moving across the whole city and as a result the overall body of Christ is growing faster than the population, and the city is being reached. And there's an impact for Christ made in the whole city.

The core of the movement

There are three layers to this kind of influence. At the core of this kind of movement is the first layer: a *contextualized biblical gospel theology*. Where do I get this? From the Book of Acts, from reading the history of revivals, and from my own experience here in New York. By "a biblical gospel," I mean a God-ordained third way between legalistic moralism and licentious relativism. When Paul writes to the Romans and rolled out the gospel, he first clarifies, "Look at the Gentiles, the pagans, who are living according to their own desires. That's not the gospel." Then he says, "And look at those who are living according to the Law of Moses. They've missed the gospel too."

Historically the Christian church, as Martin Luther expressed it, "is like a drunk man who, having fallen off the horse on one side, gets back up and falls off on the other."

Most Bible believing Christians today assume the main way you can lose the gospel is on the side of liberalism, relativism, the idea that you don't have to accept everything in the Bible, because it undermines biblical authority. Yes, that loses the gospel. But on the other side is legalism and moralism and Phariseism. In 2008 during the presidential campaign, a guy got up and said to the candidates: "I've got one question to ask, and if you answer this question, I'll know everything I need to know about you: Do you believe every word of the Bible is true?"

That man's perspective is wrong. While I agree that it's very important to believe that every word in the Bible is true, both Jesus and the Pharisees agreed with that. You can believe that every word in the Bible is true and be lost, absolutely lost, as the Pharisees were. The church loses its life-changing dynamism to the degree that its theology goes off to this side or that side—into either uptight legalistic moralism, or into latitudinarianism, broadness, not believing the Bible, licentiousness, relativism.

By saying the biblical gospel is in the middle, that's not saying "moderation in all things." Jesus wasn't moderate in anything. He was radically gentle and radically truth loving at the same time. The gospel isn't a kind of middle-of-the-road, lukewarm thing. But the gospel is neither legalism nor licentiousness. And to the degree we lose the biblical gospel, we're never going to be a movement that reaches the city.

The core of the movement is also a *contextualized gospel*. Contextualization has not so much to do with theology as with culture. So, for example, recently I was talking to a young Christian woman who had moved to New York City years ago with her family from another country and grew up in a wonderful ethnic church. But eventually she became frustrated with that church because, as she said, "It was more important for them to stay inside their culture than to reach out to the rest of New York. The only people who would ever find faith in that church were people who were absolutely like everybody from my homeland." They refused to assimilate, to adapt to the fact that they're in New York. Everything was so culturally narrow that the only people who would ever find faith there were people who had just gotten off a plane or a boat.

That's a failure to adapt, failure to contextualize. Paul said, "I've become all things to all people. I'm a Jew to the Jew; I'm a Greek to the Greek, in order that all people will receive the gospel."

Of course, you can over-adapt. To adapt too much to the culture of New York City is to adapt to worldliness, sin, greed, and idolatry. So where do you find that middle ground, where we contextualizing to the culture around us so that people there will hear the gospel, but we're not capitulating culturally? Ah, that's the area of wisdom. That's a contextualized biblical gospel theology. That's the first layer.

Churches multiplying and not alike

Around that core, for this to be a city-wide gospel movement, there's a second layer. We need a number of church multiplication movements within different denominations: new churches being planted and churches being renewed among the Baptists and Presbyterians and Pentecostals and Episcopalians and Lutherans and so on. (Sorry if I left somebody out, but there are about 26,000 Protestant denominations ...) Cities are diverse, and for reasons that only God knows, not everybody in New York who wants to become a Christian will want to be a Presbyterian. Hard as that is to believe! And not everybody is going to be Pentecostal. Or Baptist.

For some reason God uses different denominational traditions to reach all sorts of people. And unless multiple denominations are flourishing, you don't reach a city.

Those distinctives are important. I hope that you really are what you are! And yet, for a city-wide movement, we can't be so tribal that you're a Presbyterian first and a Christian second. You're a Christian first and everything else second. You're a Christian first, and not only are you a Baptist or a Presbyterian second, you're a Christian first and you're a white or a Black or Asian or a Hispanic second.

In a city in which the body of Christ is so divided by denominations that they do not help each other, they do not work together, and therefore there isn't a dynamism that works across denominational barriers, you're not going to reach a city.

When I say "multiplication movement," I mean you are part of a multiplication movement if half the churches in your network are planting another church every five years. Then you're moving, because new churches grow and reach non-Christians in a way that older churches do not. Listen, my church is 21 years old, and we do not reach non-Christians the way we did in the first five years. That's just the way it is. New churches tend to reach non-Christians at a rate 5-7 times the rate of older churches. Why? It's just the way God works. There are sociological reasons, too. New churches are more focused on people outside: how are we going to reach out? As churches get older, they focus more on the needs of the people inside.

We need new churches if the body of Christ overall in a city is going to grow, new churches in a variety of traditions, denominations, and networks.

A ministry ecosystem

The third layer around the two inner rings is the most complex layer, and I call it an *ecosystem of ministry networks*. An ecosystem is a biological system by which various life forms feed on each other and life grows. And if you take out one element, the whole system suffers.

Consider seven kinds of ministry networks that inter-relate with the churches. Some people call these parachurch or specialty ministries. But at least seven of these are an important part of the city-reaching ecosystem.

- 1. City-wide prayer.** Revivals always happen with extraordinary prayer, uniting for the city, for one another.
- 2. Specialist evangelism, movements reaching people of various ages, locations, stages, nationalities, religions.** The local church is a generalist place. We need help with youth, students, the business community, artists, and people of different faiths.
- 3. Justice and mercy.** In order to tackle the problems of the city, to reach out to the poor, to demonstrate the gospel to those who haven't seen it, we need those specializing in justice and mercy initiatives.
- 4. Vocational faith/work initiatives.** We need the artists coming together, the media people coming together, the business types, the educators, etc. Almost always this has to happen across denominations for them to know one another and to form schools of thought on how faith affects the way in which we do our work.
- 5. Institutions that support the family in the city.** In New York City, the Jewish community has done an excellent job of supporting family life. The community centers, the schools, the networks make it possible to stay in the city and raise families there.
- 6. Institutions for theological training.** We need a leadership pipeline that goes from the campus to the youth to the campus through the churches very quickly and expertly prepares people theologically for ministry.
- 7. Christian leaders coming together.** When the leaders of churches and ministries have enough unity and opportunity to network, we can help each other. We can discuss and discern what other areas of the city we need to be reaching. That overcomes tribalism and contributes to the greater good.

This is what I mean by an ecosystem. It's a symbiotic relationship between the churches, which supply the people for these ministries, and the ministries, which produce people for the churches. These are interactive, interdependent forces that propel the movement forward.

When all these elements are in place, you have a gospel movement. You begin to see growth and change that goes beyond any one group, church, or network.

A whole city tipping point

When a gospel movement is underway, it may be that the Body of Christ develops to the point that a whole city tipping point is reached. By that I mean the moment when the number of gospel-shaped Christians in a city reaches critical mass. The Christian influence on the civic and social life of the city—on the very culture—is recognizable and acknowledged. That means between 10 and 20 percent of the population.

For example, neighborhoods stay largely the same if new types of residents (richer, poorer, or culturally different from the rest) comprise less than 5 percent of the population. But when the number of new residents reaches somewhere between 5 and 20 percent, depending on the culture, the whole neighborhood ethos shifts.

Prison ministers report that if more than 10 percent of the inmates become Christians, it changes the corporate culture of the prison. The relationships between prisoners, between prisoners and guards—all change.

In New York City, some groups have a palpable effect on the way life is lived when their numbers reach at least 5 to 15 percent and when the members are active in public life.

Manhattan starts to tip

We did some research about church growth in Manhattan. Twenty years ago there were approximately 1.1 million people and about 100 evangelical churches from the Upper West Side / Upper East Side down to the tip of Manhattan.

Twenty years later there are about 200 evangelical churches.

Twenty years ago, less than 1 percent of Manhattan residents, 9,000 people, were in those churches. Today, it's over 3 percent, some 35,000 people. Our church, Redeemer Presbyterian, which is a big church, has planted a lot of churches. But it's exciting for us to realize that we have been directly involved with, at most, a quarter of those new churches.

In other words, something is going on in New York that goes beyond one church, one network, or any one denomination. It goes beyond any particular race or ethnic group. It's a movement.

We're a long way from getting to the place we need to be, a city tipping point, when 10 to 20 percent of the population goes to those churches, and you begin to realize that the whole city, the whole culture is going to change because of the impact of Christians in a place like New York.

That's what we're after. It takes a movement to reach a city, and that's more than just planting a church, or even seeing your denomination growing.

I'm praying that people will become part of a city-wide gospel movement, here in New York if you're here, or that God will raise up people who will pray for the same thing in the city where you live right now.

What Is a City?

The main Hebrew word translated "city" refers to any human settlement surrounded by a fortification or wall. Most ancient cities numbered only about 1,000-3,000 in population. "City," therefore, meant not so much population size as density. Psalm 122:3 refers to this density:

"Jerusalem, built as a city should be, closely compact." The word translated "compact" meant to be closely intertwined and joined. In a fortified city, the people lived close to one another in tightly compacted houses and streets. In fact, most ancient cities were estimated to be five to ten acres, with 240 residents per acre. By comparison, contemporary Manhattan houses only 105 residents per acre.

In ancient times, then, a city was what would today be called a "mixed use" walkable human settlement. Because of the population's density, there were places to live and work, to buy and sell, to pursue and enjoy art, to worship and to seek justice—all within an easy walk. In ancient times, rural areas and villages could not provide all these elements, and in our modern time, the "suburb" deliberately avoids this pattern. Suburbs are defined by single-use zones—so places to live, work, play, and learn are separated from one another and are reachable only by car, usually through pedestrian-hostile zones.

What makes a city a city is proximity. It brings people—and therefore residences, workplaces, and cultural institutions—together. It creates street life and marketplaces, bringing about more person-to-person interactions in a day than are possible anywhere else. This is what the biblical writers meant when they talked about a "city."—Tim Keller