

LOVING THE {CITY}



DOING BALANCED,
GOSPEL-CENTERED
MINISTRY IN YOUR CITY

A New Edition of
Section Two



CENTER
CHURCH

TIMOTHY KELLER

WITH NEW CONTRIBUTIONS BY
DANIEL STRANGE, GABRIEL SALGUERO, & ANDY CROUCH

A PDF COMPANION TO THE AUDIOBOOK

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Loving the City

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

WHAT TO DO

How the gospel is expressed in a particular church in one community at a point in time

- *Local cultural adaptation*
- *Worship style & programming*
- *Discipleship & outreach processes*
- *Church governance & management*

MINISTRY
EXPRESSION



HOW TO SEE

A faithful restatement of the gospel with rich implications for life, ministry, and mission in a type of culture at a moment in history

- *Vision and values*
- *Ministry "DNA"*
- *Emphases, stances*
- *Philosophy of ministry*

THEOLOGICAL
VISION

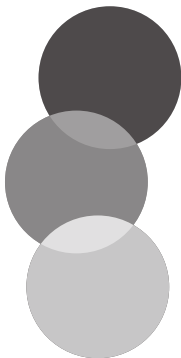


WHAT TO BELIEVE

Timeless truths from the Bible about God, our relationship to him, and his purposes in the world

- *Theological tradition*
- *Denominational affiliation*
- *Systematic & biblical theology*

DOCTRINAL
FOUNDATION



Chapter 1

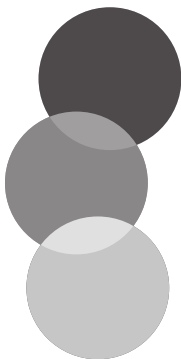
INTENTIONAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This chapter defines contextualization as “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.” Unpack the four parts of this definition. Which of these elements of contextualization do you tend to do best? Which do you tend to skip or overlook?
2. Evangelicals often try to defend contextualization by arguing that it is about adapting the less essential parts of Christianity and that syncretism and compromise occur when “the critical and basic elements” of the gospel are lost. In this view, contextualization involves keeping the essentials while flexing on the nonessentials. What is the danger of this approach, according to this chapter?
3. Keller writes, “There is no universal presentation of the gospel for all people.” What do you think is meant by this statement? Do you agree or disagree?
4. D. A. Carson is quoted as stating that “no truth which human beings may articulate can ever be articulated in a culture-transcending way.”

What distinctive values or biases have you learned through your own cultural formation (family, hometown, nation, race, church, etc.) that affect your communication of truth? Which biblical themes are you most tempted to edit out? How did you become aware of these biases?

5. Keller writes, “One of the most basic mistakes ministers make is to regurgitate the methods and programs that have personally influenced them. After experiencing the impact of a ministry in one part of the world, they take up the programs and methods of that ministry and reproduce them elsewhere virtually unchanged . . . They are contextualizing their ministry expression to themselves, not to the people they want to reach.” How have you seen this mistake made in ministry? What do you need to do to begin intentionally contextualizing?

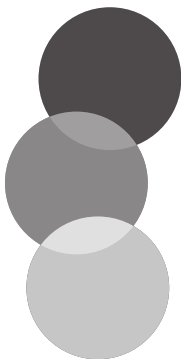


Chapter 2

BALANCED CONTEXTUALIZATION

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When you err in the way you contextualize the gospel, do you tend to create a “bridge to nowhere,” or a “bridge from nowhere”? What makes you suspect this is true? What factors or beliefs contribute to this tendency?
2. Keller writes, “Our interaction with a different culture leads us to ask the text questions we may never have asked it before and to see many things we didn’t see clearly before ... As a result we begin to see truths and insights in the Bible that were there all along, yet we had simply been blind to them.” Have you ever experienced the benefit of interacting with another culture in this way? What blind spots has this experience revealed to you in your own understanding of the Bible and the gospel?
3. What is your “canon within the canon”? Take a few moments to jot down the themes of Scripture to which you typically give special prominence. Which parts do you notice other Christians emphasizing that you do not? Do you see a pattern? What does this tell you about your spiritual or cultural blind spots?
4. Keller writes, “Evangelicals have been seeking to avoid either extreme on a spectrum ... At one end ... is a cultural fundamentalism that believes we can read the Bible and express its theology in culture-free, universal terms; at the other end is a cultural relativism that holds ‘that the Scripture can have no other meaning than that which is permitted by the conceptuality of the present-day situation.’” What dangers are associated with each of these two extremes? What examples have you seen of either extreme? On which side of the spectrum do you tend to err?



Chapter 3

BIBLICAL CONTEXTUALIZATION

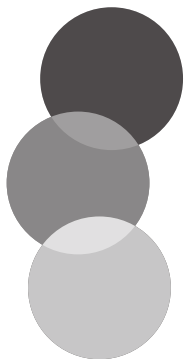
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to Romans 1 and 2, what is the basis for contextualization?
2. Keller writes, “Christians may struggle to understand why non-Christians often exceed Christians in moral practice, wisdom, and skill. The doctrine of sin means that as believers we are never as good as our right worldview should make us. At the same time, the doctrine of our creation in the image of God, and an understanding of common grace, remind us that nonbelievers are never as flawed as their false worldview should make them.” What does this understanding of common grace suggest about our stance toward the culture? How does this awareness provide balance to your engagement with the culture? What types of relationships, spiritual disciplines, readings, and exercises help you employ a balance of “critical enjoyment and an appropriate wariness”?
3. The formula for contextualization, as derived from 1 Corinthians 1, is defined as applying the gospel “to confront and complete each society’s baseline cultural narrative.” This must be done both negatively and positively, confronting each culture for its idols, while positively highlighting its aspirations and ultimate values. Name an idol in your own culture. How might Paul have exposed the futility of that idol while also affirming the God-given desires that led people to pursue it in the first place? How might he have persuaded his listeners that the true answer to their deepest desires can be found in Jesus?

4. This chapter summarizes six ways of making a biblical appeal to people to come to God:

- out of fear of judgment and death
- out of a desire for a release from the burdens of guilt and shame
- out of appreciation for the “attractiveness” of truth
- to satisfy unfulfilled existential longings
- for help with a problem
- simply out of a desire to be loved

Which of the six ways of making appeals are most comfortable and natural for you? Which are most difficult? Why? What resources can help you become more adept at using all these appeals?



Chapter 4

ACTIVE CONTEXTUALIZATION

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

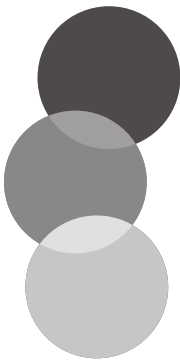
1. Keller writes, “The first task of contextualization is to immerse yourself in the questions, hopes, and beliefs of the culture so you can give a biblical, gospel-centered response to its questions.” What are some ways you have found to read and study the culture around you? What questions is the culture asking? How has involvement in the pastoral needs of your community helped you to better understand the culture and people you seek to reach?
2. This chapter highlights three ways of reasoning: conceptual, concrete relational, and intuitional.
 - **Conceptual.** People make decisions and arrive at convictions through analysis and logic.
 - **Concrete relational.** People make decisions and arrive at convictions through relationships and practice.
 - **Intuitional.** People make decisions and arrive at convictions through insight and experience.

Which of these three approaches resonates most with you? With the people you are trying to reach? If they are different, what can you do to bridge the gap?

3. Another task of contextualization is discerning the dominant world-views and belief systems of a culture. Keller writes, “Contextualized gospel ministry should affirm the beliefs of the culture wherever it can be done with integrity.” He identifies “A” beliefs, which “roughly correspond to some parts of biblical teaching,” and “B” beliefs, which contradict Christian truth (“B” doctrines) and “lead listeners to find some Christian doctrines implausible or overtly offensive.”

Take a moment to identify a key “A” doctrine—a teaching from the Bible that would be generally accepted and affirmed by your target culture—and how it expresses itself in the culture through “A” beliefs. What is an example of a “B” belief in your culture, and what “B” doctrines does it conflict with directly?

4. Keller writes, “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 to compelling confrontation*. This happens when we base our argument for ‘B’ doctrines *directly on* the ‘A’ doctrines.” Using the examples you discussed in the last question, how might you do this?
5. This chapter gives a summary of several cultural pressure points and atonement grammars. Which of these pressure points and grammars are less familiar or natural to you, but worth investigating? How might adding them to your repertoire strengthen your effectiveness in mission?

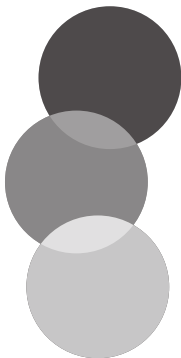


Chapter 5

THE TENSION OF THE CITY

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How would you describe your own attitude toward cities? Indifferent? Hostile? Romanticized? Positive? In what way has this chapter challenged your attitude toward cities?
2. Cities are places of safety, diversity, and productivity. How does each of these characteristics uniquely define urban culture?
3. Keller writes, “Cities, quite literally, have more of the image of God per square inch than any other place on earth. How can we not be drawn to such masses of humanity if we care about the same things that God cares about?” What are some of the reasons that people avoid ministry in the city? What are some of the reasons that they are attracted to urban ministry?
4. How can you and the community of believers to which you belong work to “seek the peace and prosperity of the city”? What does this look like in your context?

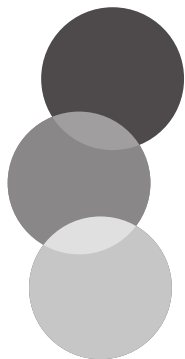


Chapter 6

REDEMPTION AND THE CITY

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Keller writes, “The church should continue to relate to the human cities of our time, not as the people of God did under Abraham, Moses, or David, but as they did during the time of the exile.” In what ways is the situation of the Christian church different from that of the exiles in Babylon? In what ways is it similar? How does this affect the mission of the church today?
2. From Acts 17 through the end of the book of Acts, Paul has strategically traveled to the intellectual (Athens), commercial (Corinth), religious (Ephesus), and political (Rome) centers of the Roman world. What are the centers of power and influence in your own local context? How is your church seeking to strategically reach these different centers of cultural influence?
3. Keller writes, “Then, as now, the cities were filled with the poor, and urban Christians’ commitment to the poor was visible and striking.” Do you believe this is still true of the Christian church? If so, give an example. If not, how can this legacy be recaptured?
4. Keller writes, “Gardening (the original human vocation) is a paradigm for cultural development. A gardener neither leaves the ground as is, nor does he destroy it. Instead, he rearranges it to produce food and plants for human life. He *cultivates* it. (The words *culture* and *cultivate* come from the same root.) Every vocation is in some way a response to, and an extension of, the primal, Edenic act of cultivation.” Discuss how different vocations are a response to our call to cultivate culture. How does the creation mandate transform our understanding of work and vocation?

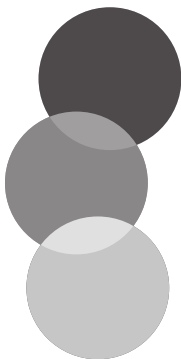


Chapter 7

THE CALL TO THE CITY

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Where have you witnessed some of the things discussed in this chapter (globalization, gentrification, city renaissance, reverse commuting, postmodernism, etc.) in the life of your nearest city? How do they affect life in that city? How do they affect ministry in that city?
2. If our future will be largely an urban culture, what changes should the church be making today to prepare and adapt?
3. One significant trend discussed in this chapter is the influx of Christian immigrant populations and their increasing access to elite levels of business and society. How do you believe their contributions will shape the future of your ministry?
4. Which of the following city-prone groups do you feel most passionate to reach: the younger generation, the “cultural elites,” accessible “unreached” people groups, or the poor? Is that group present in your setting right now? How is urbanization affecting them? Take a moment to reflect on what it would be like to minister meaningfully to the group you have identified.

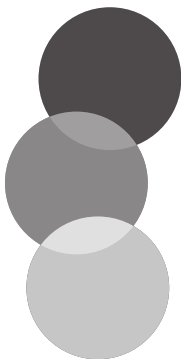


Chapter 8

THE GOSPEL FOR THE CITY

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If you are not located in a city, how might City Vision shape and improve the fruitfulness of your current ministry?
2. How is agglomeration evident around you? Which types of trades, skills, inventors, or culture makers are concentrated most highly in your area? In what ways can your ministry seek face-to-face opportunities to minister to and through this population—that is, to become an “agglomerizing” church?
3. Keller writes, “The city itself brings the gospel to us. The city will challenge us to discover the power of the gospel in new ways.” How does this chapter suggest this happens? How have you experienced this?
4. Which of the seven features of a church for the city does your church currently exhibit? How might those outside your community answer this question?



Chapter 9

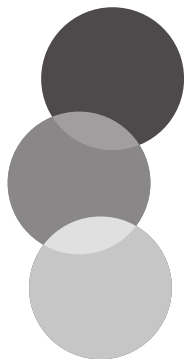
THE CULTURAL CRISIS OF THE CHURCH

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Keller writes, “The contemporary American church is pulsing with intramural debates.” Take a few minutes to list some of the deepest controversies that have taken up time and provoked debate within your own theological community or denomination. Which of these can be clearly attributed to culture shift and your community’s views on Christ and culture?
2. Several causes are given for the shift in our culture away from traditional moral values (the rejection of authority, radical individualism, technological advances, etc.). Regardless of the cause, the gospel message has now become “increasingly incomprehensible” to people. How have you experienced this challenge as you communicate the gospel in your own cultural context? What aspects of the gospel do you find are most difficult for people to grasp?
3. Those who promote pietism argue that:
 - the way to change the world is to change hearts one at a time through evangelism and discipleship
 - increasing the numbers of Christians will somehow improve or change a society
 - it is not a proper goal for Christians to try to improve culture at all, even indirectly

After reading this chapter, how would you respond to each of these objections? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the pietistic stance toward culture?

4. Which of the various religious responses to the culture shift described in this chapter (i.e., Religious Right, seeker church, emerging/missional church, etc.) have you been involved with? Did the historical overview in this chapter match your own experience?



Chapter 10

THE CULTURAL RESPONSES OF THE CHURCH

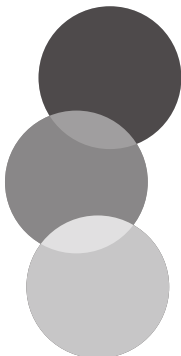
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This chapter summarizes four models of cultural response:

- Transformationist model
- Relevance model
- Counterculturalist model
- Two Kingdoms model

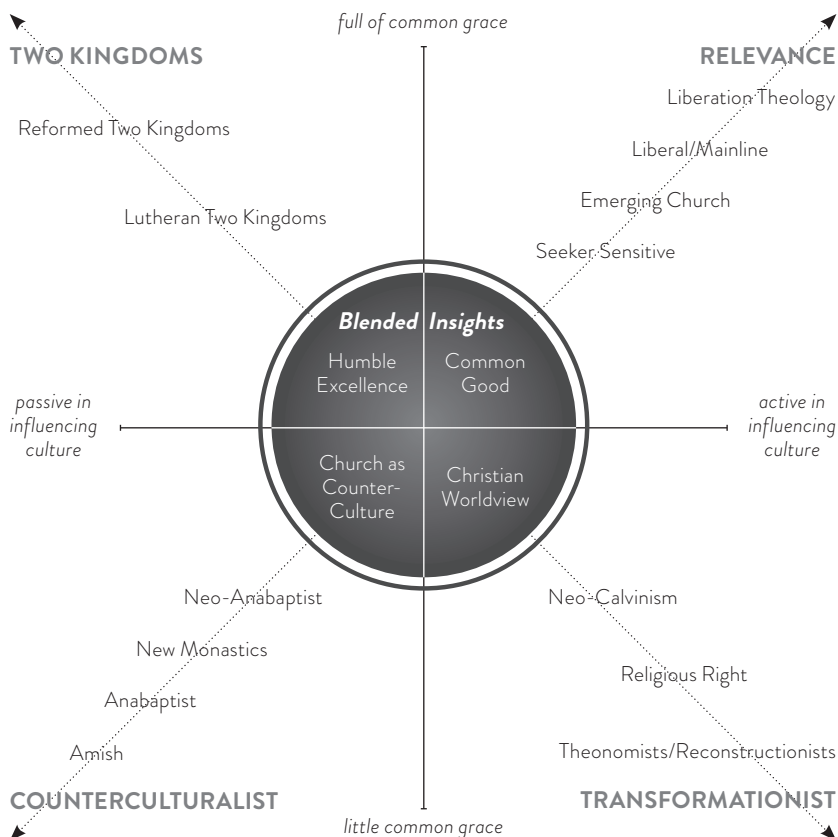
Which of the four models most closely represents your own? Which models were you unfamiliar with? Which critiques did you particularly resonate with, and which (if any) did you find yourself objecting to?

2. Keller writes, “The fact that models often fail as descriptors is instructive in itself.” Models are often inadequate, particularly when we are looking at the sharpest and clearest version of a position. Yet their very inadequacy can help us by revealing the limitations of a particular view and encouraging us to avoid extremes. With this in mind, how would you summarize the greatest strength of each model? What do you believe is the biggest problem or weakness with each model?
3. Take some time to identify the various streams of theology that have shaped your thinking about the gospel and culture, noting the authors, mentors, traditions, articles, conferences, personal experiences, and biases that have influenced you. Has a particular stream of thought dominated your thinking about the church and culture, or have you been influenced by multiple streams? Which ones? Who were the key voices that shaped your practice into what it is today?



Chapter 11

WHY ALL THE MODELS ARE RIGHT ... AND WRONG



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Keller writes, “Some people conform well to the type, while others do not. Within a given model, we can find areas of pointed disagreement . . . Thoughtful proponents of certain models are always open to having their views tempered and enriched by insights from the others.” What in this chapter challenged or provoked you? What did you find helpful? What did you disagree with?
2. This chapter provides two fundamental questions about culture to consider:
 - Should we be pessimistic or optimistic about the possibility for cultural change?
 - Is the current culture redeemable and good, or fundamentally fallen?

How would you answer each of these questions? On a scale from 0 to 10 (0 = not at all, and 10 = highly), how optimistic are you about the ability of believers to change culture? On the same scale, how redeemable do you believe culture to be? Do you find yourself leaning in one direction or the other on each question? If so, why?

Possibility for Cultural Change

Pessimistic

Optimistic

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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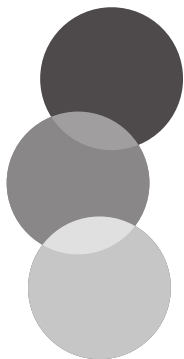
Nature of Culture

Fundamentally fallen

Redeemable and good

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
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3. D. A. Carson speaks of allowing the various points of biblical theology to “control our thinking simultaneously and all the time.” How do the elements of the biblical story line affect your understanding and practice of cultural engagement?
 - creation
 - fall
 - redemption and restoration
4. Examine the illustration of cultural engagement found in this PDF. Where would you place yourself on this illustration? Where would you place each of your ministry colleagues and leaders? How can the different emphases within your team help to create a balanced, faithful perspective on cultural engagement?



Chapter 12

CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT THROUGH BLENDED INSIGHTS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Keller writes, “If all these models in their balanced formulation have biblical warrant, where will we situate ourselves? The answer is not simply an attempt to hit on the perfect balance between all four all of the time.” We must also learn to discern the current “season” in the cycle of the church’s relationship to a culture.
 - *Winter*—a church that is hostile to culture, seeing little fruit; embattled and spiritually weak.
 - *Spring*—a church that is embattled, possibly persecuted by the culture, but is seeing growth.
 - *Summer*—an “allied” church, highly regarded by the culture with Christians in the centers of cultural production.
 - *Autumn*—a church that is increasingly marginalized in a post-Christian culture, looking for new ways to reach out winsomely.

In which of these four seasons do you and your ministry peers find yourself right now? To which signs or factors can you point as proof? Does this change when you consider your context nationally or regionally? How is this current season of cultural engagement different from that of the previous generation of church leaders?

2. Andy Crouch's distinction between postures and gestures is "a vivid and elegant way to express this flexibility" needed for balanced cultural engagement. Crouch sees our basic model or stance toward culture to be a "posture"—our "unconscious default position"—but a "gesture" is an ad hoc move that briefly seems to come out of another model. Can you cite an instance when you embraced a gesture that didn't match your typical posture? What were the reasons that led you to do this?
3. What do you think of the distinction between the role of the church as an organized institution and the church as an organic body of individual believers? How does this distinction aid in thinking about cultural engagement and the mission of the church? Do you believe it is a biblical distinction?
4. Keller writes, "Many of us are not choosing our Christ and culture model in the right way. Instead of looking at Scripture, the culture, and our own gifts and calling, we tend to form our views in visceral reactions to the behavior of other Christians." This chapter closes with four practical suggestions.
 - Avoid arrogance.
 - Avoid blame.
 - Avoid frustration.
 - Avoid naïveté.

How can you seek to avoid reacting to the extremes of other models? Which of these four concerns is most relevant to you?