

THE VISION FOR LIFE PODCAST

Episode 138 | Remembering Tim Keller

Featuring: Hunter Beaumont and Dave Morlan



Hunter: Hey everyone, this is Hunter, and before we get into this week's episode, I want to invite you to Pursuit Night coming up on Friday, October 20th. This fall in our life together at Fellowship Denver, we've been learning about Jesus's great promise to us that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him. And that means that when we are obedient to His great commission to go and make disciples, we get to experience His power, His presence, and His authority. And the first way we obey the great commission is to just pray for what God has already promised to do. And so, we're going to gather over the course of the next year on some select Friday nights in order to pursue God for what He's promised us through prayer and through worship. Now, if you've always experienced group prayer as long-winded and boring, I'm going to be teaching us some new-for-us habits and practices for praying together. So, that's going to be fun to learn. Our worship team is going to be leading us in worship. And so, I hope you'll make plans to join us on Friday night, October 20th for our first Pursuit Night. Full details are on our website at fellowshipdenver.org/pursuit.

Hunter: Welcome to the Vision for Life podcast, an ongoing, never-ending conversation between the pastors of Fellowship Denver and the church at large. Each week we talk about life, faith, the Bible, and how to follow Jesus as we go about our daily lives. I'm Autumn, host of the podcast, and today I'm joined by two of our pastors, Hunter—*Hello, Autumn*—and Dave.

Dave: Good to be on the show with you, Hunter.

Hunter: As our listeners can hear, this is not Autumn. Autumn is on sabbatical. We sent her away, and we hope she comes back.

Dave: Yes we do.

Hunter: She's in Scotland, or she's crafting or doing something like that right now.

Dave: Yeah, she's having probably more fun than whatever it is that you're doing at home right now. She's probably enjoying her activity a little bit more.

Hunter: And doing it better.

Dave: That's right. That's certainly what we hope for her right now in this time.

Hunter: Well, even though we are missing Autumn, we wanted to take a podcast episode and do an appreciation and a reflection on the life of pastor Tim Keller. He passed away early this year on May 19th. He was 72 years old. Our listeners may know Him through His sermons, through His books, which were widely distributed in red. He had a big influence, Dave, on me and you. And we thought it would be good to honor this man's life and just to reflect on all that God gave us through His life and through His ministry, much of which has shaped Fellowship Denver and has shaped what we do in this podcast, which is try to think about how the Gospel of Jesus impacts every area of our lives.

Dave: Yeah, it's certainly something important for us to do. When he died, I think a lot of people had to take some time to really reflect on the depth and breadth of his influence on them personally. But I know for you and I, H, His influence on us at a time when we were starting Fellowship is significant. And so, to really reflect and really thank God for this man, and also to recall all the ways God used him is, I think, honoring to God and to give honor to His servants too and to give honor to and good reflection on Tim Keller, I think it's appropriate.

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Hunter: I can think of many pastors and authors and teachers and professors who influenced me at a particular phase of my life or my ministry or my preparation for ministry. And then there's just a couple, and Tim Keller is one of them, who I just have learned from ever since I learned about him, knew about him. And at each phase of ministry, I might have learned something slightly different from Tim Keller, but I learned there was always something he had to teach me.

Dave: And even at the end of his life.

Hunter: Even at the end of his life. Yeah, that's a great way to say that. He, the way he died, the way he faced death was, I'm sure when my time comes, if it comes in a way that I have to kind of get ready, I'm sure I'll be going back and studying what he wrote and said in these last few months of his life.

Hey, tell us this, how did you get introduced to Tim Keller? Where'd you first hear about him, learn about him? How did you get exposed to him and his work?

Dave: I was in seminary in Dallas. So, around the same time, you know, you'll answer that question too. And I forget exactly what the conversation was or what the book was. I am not sure if he had even officially published a book at that time, but we had heard about that church in New York. So, Renee and I took a trip when I think it was maybe our second or third year in Dallas. We flew to New York, and we wanted to see Redeemer and see Tim Keller and see kind of what that church looked like. And there was another church pastored by Jim Cymbala. That was a charismatic church that was in New York as well, Brooklyn Tabernacle.

And so, we spent a week, and half of it was with this interesting, very intellectual, Presbyterian church, and the other half of it was observing Jim Cymbala's church, which was highly charismatic. And both of those churches in that week really kind of began to kind of plant a seed for Renee and I, sort of the kinds of ministry that we might be interested in, in a city context.

Hunter: Okay, I've known you for the last 24 years. I've never heard you talk about that trip, but I'm not surprised to hear that you just took a trip to New York. You were much more worldly than I was. I would never have thought to have taken a trip to New York to do that. The only trips I took were back and forth between Dallas and Denver, just wearing out American Airlines.

Dave: Well, God used those trips too.

Hunter: I first got exposed to Tim Keller in seminary as well, and I can't remember who told me about him, but I was in a season of life spiritually—and I think I've talked about this on the podcast before—but I had been really kind of burned out in my Christianity. I had been exposed to a very activist understanding of following Jesus, doing ministry, living for the kingdom of God, and that's still an emphasis that I like to bring to our people today, but I had also started to feel like, man, there's just too much to do, and I can't do it all, and I'm not a very good Christian—I'm a pretty sorry Christian. I'm still very sinful and not very spiritually powerful and energetic, and not very devoted, wholly devoted to Jesus. I got turned on, through that kind of season of discouragement, I got turned on to an understanding of the gospel that said, the gospel is not just to kind of get you into heaven, and it's not just to get you what the Reformed theologians call "justified," and what Paul called "justified," but the gospel also sanctifies you, and God provides ongoing grace through Jesus Christ to strengthen and to sustain and to grow His people. And I had never understood that it was not just all up to me to walk with Jesus or to grow as a Christian or to do ministry, but that Jesus actually promised me grace to grow me

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and sustain me and to empower me. And when I got turned on to that understanding, my heart just exploded with joy. A huge burden was lifted off my shoulders, and I just thought it's not all up to me to be a Christian and to even grow as a Christian, and there's more grace, there's more forgiveness, there's more empowerment. There's just more grace for me as a Christian. And then kind of parallel to that, I also discovered that the gospel is- God is, through the gospel, is going to renew all creation through the new heavens and the new earth. And so, the gospel is not just this little small thing that talks about how to get your sin forgiven, but it becomes the story in which you live all of your life, and it applies to every area of your life. And I have never connected to things like my work and just every dimension of life, so this is kind of the renewal I'm going through, and I figured that out through the help of some professors. I had been reading Augustine who emphasized that some. I had been reading some, there was a magazine back in that day, it may still be around, called *Modern Reformation*, that really had this emphasis in its every month, and its issues, and so I was reading that, and then someone said, hey, have you heard of Tim Keller? Because he's doing all of that, and-

Dave: -and by the way, I may or may not have access to a 35-page paper by Hunter Beaumont in seminary, something along the lines of "The Story of God in Scripture" that incorporates all this stuff.

Hunter: Well, I don't have access to that.

Dave: I may or may not have access to that. I remember it clearly.

Hunter: Please text it over to me, I'd like to see what I did. Someone said, have you heard Tim Keller, and at the time, Tim Keller had not published any books, and I don't even know if the sermons were online, but he had started to write some PDFs of papers, like white papers, and you could kind of find them different places online, or people had them. And you would email people and go, do you have that Tim Keller PDF on this? So, I clicked a few Tim Keller PDFs, and I was like, oh my gosh, this guy is thinking about all this same stuff I've been thinking about. So, it was super affirming in that respect, but he's thought about it a lot more deeply than I have. He's thought about everything, right? He's gone a lot deeper into history, into the Christian tradition. He's pulling all this together, he's saying it in ways that I would not have been able to, and he just gave language and depth, and research, and thought to what I had kind of been feeling and sensing. And so, he just fueled my season of renewal. That's when I got turned on to Tim Keller.

Dave: And that was right at the season when God was sort of calling us to start Fellowship in. We were both in Dallas, and kind of all these sort of streams of thought and ideas and God's movement was sort of all happening at the same time.

Hunter: That's right. And so, kind of speaking to how Tim Keller just kept teaching me, first he taught me about gospel renewal, what he called gospel renewal, and that's the language for what I'm describing, where the gospel is bigger than just forgiveness of sin, and you're now going to heaven when you die, so get busy serving Jesus. So, first I learned that, and then I discovered, oh my gosh, this guy planted a church, and we're thinking about planting a church, and holy cow, he's thought really well about church planting. And so, went and learned that from him as well.

Okay, we identified a few primary themes from his life and his ministry that we gleaned. They may not be the primary themes, it's hard to even say what is the primary theme of Tim Keller's ministry, but we gleaned three that we identified that were primary for us, and then a couple other things that were kind of secondary or notable about him. The first theme that we came up with was just what we've been talking about, gospel renewal, the gospel is for Christians.

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Dave: Well, I remember our very first Gospel Class, the language that we used.

Hunter: The Gospel Class was what we now call DNA group.

Dave: That's right.

Hunter: It was like an introduction-to-our-church class that we did for people that were new to the church. Just for some context.

Dave: Yeah, that's right. But it was, you know, 15 plus years ago. But it was a radical idea that- most people thought of growth as a Christian as either discipleship or maturity, on one end, and then like introduction to Christianity, evangelism, conversion, on the other pole, but there was really nothing to connect them. The gospel was just sort of the introductory point. And so, I remember in teaching in gospel class, all this influenced by much of the reading of Tim Keller, but to communicate the good news to Christians that the gospel was still for them.

Hunter: Yeah.

Dave: That they can actually draw from the riches of God's grace in their growth as key to maturity was—*is*—so life giving.

Hunter: Yes. And so, I also now say the gospel is for Christians. And what I mean by that is it's not just an evangelistic message for non-Christians. I had been really shaped in what was taught at the time, Campus Crusade for Christ, now Cru, campus ministry, and in Cru, which is a fantastic kind of evangelism ministry to college students, what I had picked up intentionally or not from Cru is the gospel is the message we share with the non-Christians. And I had not learned that there was grace for me as a Christian, and that I still needed the gospel. I thought, oh, I needed the gospel when I became a Christian, now I need discipleship.

Dave: That's right. And more discipline

Hunter: And more discipline and more disappointed, more training. But—and this is not saying you don't need those things—it's saying, underneath all of those things, what gives power and energy and life to all of those things is the gospel itself. In seminary, I also did my master's dissertation on John Calvin's theology of the Lord's Supper. And the reason I did it is because, when I read the *Institutes of Christian Religion* by John Calvin and finally got to the section on the sacraments, the Lord's Supper, this was his emphasis of the Lord's Supper: “The Lord's Supper was, is, a means by which Jesus continues to nourish His people who partake in faith and continues to nourish them with the grace He purchased for them on the cross.” And that is what I had come to see. And Calvin took that and applied it to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. And so, I was like, okay, I want to write, you know, 100 pages on that.

And so, I did a deep dive into that. But Keller was working all of this out for what does it mean for preaching? What does it mean for the life of a church? How does a church that's centered on these gospel renewal dynamics live? What is there preaching and teaching sound like? What does their community look like? These kinds of things.

Dave: That's right. He would later use language like “theological vision,” which is another expression of this, which is what does what you believe about the gospel do? Like, how does that actually impact how it is that you live out the Christian life?

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Not, are you checking all the boxes of right theology only, but what does the theology of the gospel of the cross actually do in terms of impact? How it is that you live out and are transformed and interact with the world as a result of the gospel, and that kind of- it sort of put theology, that was in one bucket in my mind, and it all of a sudden broadened it out and activated it and how it is that we actually did ministry.

Hunter: And I think you're actually describing now the second big theme we identified, which is gospel breath. So, if gospel renewal is a Christian can be tired, sinful, burned out, not feeling like they're a very good Christian, and the grace of God can renew them and sustain them. Gospel breath does ask, how does the gospel inform what we do? And it says the gospel is about more than just addressing sin. It does address sin, but it's about more than just addressing sin.

The gospel is also about recreation. Jesus talked about the coming of the kingdom of God as part of His gospel message. The kingdom of God is a renewal of the creation where heaven and earth become one. His resurrection is actually the first fruits of that. And so, therefore, when we are experiencing gospel renewal, first theme, we begin to work and live in God's world in a different way. And so, the gospel renews our working and living in the world. And so, therefore it applies to everything we work and do.

Dave: That's right. And I mean, later he would he wrote this book that would be a sort of a compilation of all these PDFs that you mentioned, but the book is called *Center Church*. And in it, the first part of it is about the gospel. Three sort of aspects of it is that the gospel is not everything. So, not everything you read about in the Bible actually is the gospel, but the gospel is a specific message, a specific story that you get in the Bible. But not everything is the Gospel. So, you participate in social justice ministries, but social justice ministries aren't the Gospel. He would get into that. The gospel is not a simple thing. So, there's also, in the New Testament, not one standard explanation of the gospel. There are all these different elements to it. So, it's not just, it's not simplistic, but then to this point, the third aspect is that the gospel impacts everything.

Hunter: And he would also emphasize the gospel is something God does. It's not something we do. So, this is one of the reasons why I don't like the phrase "living the way of Jesus." It's not a sufficient summary of Christianity because that's not the gospel. The gospel is not, we try to live the way of Jesus. That is not the gospel because that's what we do in response to the gospel. The gospel is about what God has done in Jesus, what Jesus has done for us. And in what I came to really see and appreciate through both my discouragement, then my renewal, then my discovery of Tim Keller was I actually need to keep my eyes focused on the gospel, what God does, what Jesus does, and not just on what I do, which is why you just won't find me trying to reduce Christianity to simplistic phrases like "just live the way of Jesus" or "practice the way of Jesus." I'm all for those, but not as a summary of what this thing we are doing or believing in, trusting in, is.

Dave: That's right. And he just, he articulated it in such a way that felt satisfying to the evidence of Scripture and also resonated with our actual experience with the power of the gospel itself. And so, I just love that aspect. So, what was the third kind of element that we want to highlight here?

Hunter: The third theme is this: Tim Keller planted Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City in 1989, and at that time, New York was really far ahead of most of America, perhaps with the exception of the West Coast, in terms of progressive or secular culture. And he said that largely the evangelical church in America, and really the church in America, did not know how to reach, to evangelize, or to disciple people who were immersed in that culture and were living in this kind of progressive, secular culture.

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And his project was really about doing that. And so, it was a very evangelistic church in that he didn't just want to gather people who already believed in Jesus and try to get them into a church in New York. He wanted skeptics and seekers and even people who weren't interested in Jesus until they encountered a Christian to have space to hear the gospel. And he wanted to articulate in a way that spoke to their questions, and he did deal with their questions. And he was doing that, and he had been doing that since the late 80s.

You and I discovered him 10, 12 years after he's been doing that for a solid decade plus. The church has a great track record of reaching and discipling those kinds of folks and helping them become full followers of Jesus. And as we were getting ready to move to Denver, we realized we're not moving to a Bible-belt culture. We're not moving to a culture where everyone just kind of wakes up and thinks, I should go to church. The default Christian worldview is not the major worldview of that city. Now, I had grown up not inside evangelical subculture. I personally had grown up in a more liberal-progressive home, and we participated in churches that were Protestant, but they were very liberal-Protestant. In hindsight, I would say I'm not even sure that the pastors taught Christianity. Just, if I factually go, here's what the gospel is, that's what Christianity is, I'm not sure the pastors of the churches I grew up in taught that. They may not even personally believed it. But they did believe in the ethics of Jesus and trying to be a loving person in kind of a vague and generic way. And that's, I was kind of the message the churches I grew up in. So, all that to say, I knew what it was like to not be an insider to evangelical, conservative Christianity. And I knew how strange that world seemed to someone who was an outsider to it. And Tim Keller also seemed to really understand that and know how to talk to people who weren't already insiders to that world. And he had figured it out so well. When we realized we were moving to Denver, that's the population of Denver. That's the people that- it's the majority culture in the city we're going to. It's not the only people in a reach, but it's the majority culture in the city we're going to. We just thought, we need to learn from this guy how to do ministry in a post-Christian culture.

Dave: That's right. And it kind of set out a path very quickly. And we knew this going in. I mean, Denver is different than New York. The kinds of secular sort of default beliefs that are here are different than New York. And yet, the posture towards the city and the confidence that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, and that we should be confident to explain the gospel and expectant that it's going to be transformative to people who you wouldn't think would be classic candidates to become Christians or they would themselves identify in that way, we kind of learned some of that approach and that posture towards majority non-Christian culture from him. And part of it, I think was, and I know I couldn't have articulated this initially, but now looking back, I can see this was sort of the theology at work with that engagement, was a belief that he had that reflected a theology of the Imago Dei, which is everyone has been made in God's image; there's an innate worth and value in each person. Obviously sin has entered the picture. And so, not one part of human personality isn't touched by sin either. So, people are complicated and fallen. But there's also a Imago Dei, right? He actually had that theology of Imago Dei, and then he extrapolated it towards community, towards, think more broadly in culture. So, he viewed the city, he viewed New York, as filled with people who are made in God's image. Therefore, there're going to be things that are produced in the city that are good, that God could be glorified in, that speaks to some reality of how we were made, and it's been broken by sin. And so, this place, this community, they're gonna have aspects to it that are just totally compromised and idolatrous, and you have to challenge as well. He was able to hold both those together to where he can love a place, appreciate the Imago-Dei-ness of it, and also call idols, *idols* at the same time. And we kind of picked that up. Do we love Denver and see the beauty of this place and the people here, but do we do it in a way that we don't just become converted to the city and become just reflections of its own values?

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Hunter: Another author I was reading at the same time I was reading, Tim Keller was Lesslie Newbigin, who was a British missionary to India. And then he had returned after a long period of service in India, he had returned to England. And he noticed when he had returned to England that the culture of England had shifted dramatically in a post-Christian direction. He noticed that the assumptions people used to have about the nature of God and the nature of reality the Church could use in order to lead people to faith in Jesus, that those assumptions weren't there anymore. And he saw that clearly, probably because he had not lived in that culture for years, and he had lived in a different culture. And we all know the experience of going to a culture that we don't live in and it's foreign to us, and we immediately see what's different about it. And he came to England, he's back to England after retiring as a missionary, and he's like, wow, this is really different. And it's different from what I left. And then he began a project of saying the church that lives in that culture needs to treat that culture like a mission field, and they need to think like missionaries to it in the same way that I've been thinking like a missionary to India. We need to think about that. And he was concerned that the church wasn't doing that. They were assuming that people still thought the same way that they always had. So, I'm reading Lesslie Newbigin. He's fascinating. He wrote books like *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* and *Foolishness to the Greeks*, and yet Newbigin is very heady and very theoretical, and he never had to work out what he was thinking about in the context of a local church. I don't know that he ever just pastored or planted a church in London. And Keller was every bit as heady and theoretical, and yet also seem to be showing, but what does this actually look like if a church does this? And how do you actually speak and talk as a preacher? And what kind of ministries does the church need to craft? And so he cited Lesslie Newbigin quite a bit, and he was taking some of Newbigin's thought and just making it more practical and accessible to people like you and me who were trying to figure out what does this look like when you actually start a church.

Well, I remember in the first year we were planting Fellowship, you and I went to a conference, and it was a three-day conference in Seattle at Mars Hill Church. And Mars Hill Church was at the time also really figuring out how to reach post-Christian people. It did not have the same sustainability and staying power that Redeemer had, for all kinds of reasons that have been well documented, and it had a much different personality than Redeemer. But there are kind of these two churches at the time that everyone kind of looked to as like, those churches have figured out how to reach people in post-Christian culture. And Tim Keller came to teach a three-day seminar for pastors at Mars Hill Church that they hosted. And there're probably a thousand young pastors in the room, and we all sat around round tables and we listened to Tim Keller lecture us for three days. And he wore the same red flannel shirt and blue jeans for three days.

This man flies from New York to Seattle with nothing but a toothbrush, I guess. And he produced out of that, there was just like a little notebook of just goods on gospel ministry and post-Christian culture that we just learned, and learned, and learned from. So, I think that is one of the major themes from Tim Keller's life is how do you do gospel ministry and have a missionary posture and encounter with a culture that used to be more Christian than it is today.

Dave: That's right. And some of that engagement is—I know we've also listed out like some secondary themes of Keller and his work and legacy—but some of those secondary themes are really just the fruit of his, of him thinking through the engagement of an application of the gospel in all areas of life, for people who don't have those same default beliefs. And to hold all of that at once is really a huge gift that he had.

Hunter: Okay, so our three primary themes were gospel renewal, gospel breath, and then gospel ministry in post-Christian or post-modern cultures. One of the secondary themes that you identified was simplicity versus celebrities, even embodied a little bit in that story of mine about, you know, he's clearly well-known and thousand young

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pastors are gonna show up to hear him. And he was the most anti-celebrity, well-known person you've ever seen in that he didn't even care to change clothes from day to day.

Dave: And nor did he— it seemed as if he cared very little about his own name. He's famous for not having written a book—published a book—until he was after 50. And encouraged other pastors, if they could help it, to do the same thing, but it was this idea that he was the most anti-celebrity, that it was really a humility there, that, hey, just do faithful, fruitful ministry. Year after year after year, you're going to learn a lot, you're gonna be humbled, and then when you have a track record, if an opportunity does present itself to publish or to have a bigger platform, you have something insightful to say, and you've gone through so much. It's not that different from like the qualification of elder, that they not be a recent convert, less they become puffed up of pride and fall into the snare of the devil. It's sort of a pastoral version of that. He encouraged like, listen, just do faithful work, fruitful work. And then when the time may come that you may have a bigger influence in platform, then you can publish. But be at a place spiritually, maturity-wise, wisdom-wise, that then you can really make a significant impact. And we kind of got exposed to him right at the point where he felt like, okay, I can begin to broaden my platform, but based at that point, over 20 years of faithful ministry. And I think that protected him from a lot of the classic kind of foibles and foolish sort of mistakes we've seen from all of these young celebrity pastors who have just fallen left and right. They just didn't have the maturity to handle all of the, all of the trappings that came with the recognition. And Keller sort of set out a pathway that protected him from that and modeled it for us.

Hunter: One of the things he helped me see was that there is a difference between being well-known and influential, and celebrity. And I think those two things are often conflated. We just call anyone who is well-known a celebrity. And they're actually really different. So, being well-known and being influential happens when you're doing work that other people want to learn from. And when, and sometimes in his case, that was a gift that he wanted to steward, he did not shy away from being influential. You can't write the books that he wrote and have the broad ministry that he wrote without in some ways embracing that that's part of what God had called him to. So, well-known and influential, but celebrity is more about also cultivating a persona and using the mechanisms of media and image management in order to project a persona and really presenting yourself as a larger-than-life kind of character, something almost bigger than human. That's celebrity.

When you meet someone who's truly a big celebrity, you're almost just like, oh, do you know, oh my gosh, they're just a larger-than-life figure. And so, he clearly did not want to cultivate celebrity. And it's really interesting to think that people who are well-known and influential can begin to cultivate celebrity dynamics where they start to control access and manage their image and manage their look and manage the brand. That's all kind of celebrity kind of stuff. And even the comparison we just made between Mars Hill Church and Redeemer, and Mark Driscoll and Tim Keller, we began to see Mark lean a little bit more, I think, towards celebrity dynamics. And you just didn't get that from Keller. He was a life-sized human being, even as he was really well-known. And he seemed to draw back from managing his brand and putting his name on things, even as he was very intentional about stewarding the influence that God had just given him as a result of the good ministry that he was doing.

Dave: That's right. I remember the very first time I saw him. It was in New York at Redeemer. And they had a special music sort of performance during the, I think there was probably a passing of the plate or something, and then he just, he walked out on stage, and it was just—it was at Hunter College—I think that was the name of the place where they were for a long time, and I remember how terrible the lighting was. He was just totally washed out. There was no

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spotlight, there was nothing that would direct your attention to him. And he walked out and had a music stand, and then gave the most professorial un-energetic, I would say, sermon talk. And then the rest of the service and it was remarkable how unremarkable his presentation of himself was. And yet we were in a room, and there had to have been a thousand people there. And that did something to Renee and I. I'm like, okay, you don't need to have effective ministry. You actually don't need bells and whistles. Now, I'm not necessarily against creating good environment. I mean, there's wisdom.

Hunter: Yeah, turn the lights on.

Dave: Yeah, exactly. There's wisdom that comes with that.

Hunter: Make sure the platform is- that people can see you.

Dave: Exactly, exactly. And yet it was clear that him making himself look good was very little of a priority. And that to me, that it's like, okay, but he's relying on the power of something else to drive the ministry, not himself.

Hunter: I only got to meet him one time in person. There was a gathering of church planters from cities that happened in Miami, and Redeemer City to City was kind of a church planting network and support. And they just invited some church planters from different cities, and I was fortunate to get to go to that. And it was just more Tim Keller teaching pastors, you know. And I got to talk with him a little bit. And one of the obvious things about him is that he really liked engaging with people just right as they were. And he had a conversational gift that—I would not guess he's an extrovert; I would guess he was pretty introverted—but he had developed a conversational gift just to be able to talk with people. And again, he did all he could to kind of disarm the awe that people tended to be in because he was just very unimpressive in- he wasn't trying to impress you, I guess is maybe the right way to say that.

Okay. One more secondary theme we called gospel polemic. And by that, we mean he had a way of confronting competing beliefs or alternative beliefs that were confronted. I mean, it didn't avoid the difference that is there, and yet it created space for other people, for the person who held those beliefs or for people who are listening to evaluate it, without being forced or manipulated. How would you describe this gospel polemic dynamic?

Dave: Well, to him, he would say the way it is that you disagree with your opponents actually is part of how you present the gospel. So, he just made it a point of, the way I'm going to love my opponent is I'm going to know their position better than they do. And it's really an impressive strategy because people feel heard and understood and known. They're not going to be stereotyped. They're not going to feel like, oh, you just sort of highlighted the worst part of my argument and then conflated that such to where my legitimate part of my argument, you're kind of stuffing under the- no, he would never do that. I'm going to take the best points and articulate it as best as I possibly can so they feel heard, and then I'm going to tear you to shreds. After, and then just, and by saying that, just going to show where it falls short. And ultimately, where the gospel actually fulfills the good desire behind the argument that you're articulating for the other person, the gospel actually fulfills it better, and it's so good. The discussion around winsomeness right now, I feel like it's such, is it itself like the opposite way of doing that, which is it's showing just one aspect of gospel politics and not really showing the full thing of it. It is absolutely confrontational. But in a way that is powerful and productive and actually persuasive. It's a proverb, a soft tongue breaks a bone. He took that basic proverb and he—and the proverb is about listening and then articulating the truth—and then if the idea is to win a heart, the idea is to win people over, which is the idea, he kind of, this gospel polemic kind of idea that says, is itself biblical? We see Paul doing this.

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Hunter: Yeah. If our listeners are interested in exploring that more, he wrote several things on persuasion. And so, if you Google “Tim Keller persuasion,” you’ll probably find some PDFs or some articles on that. But I remember hearing him say several times, the first step in persuasion is, you must understand the other viewpoint in such a way that you can summarize it in a way that they recognize the summary. They’re like, yep, that’s what I believe. And they don’t- we all know the experience of someone summarizing another person’s argument, and maybe we are sympathetic to that argument—maybe it’s our argument—and we like, no, that’s not what I mean; you don’t get what I mean. And he says, you must be able to summarize the other person’s argument in the best possible light in a way that they would recognize, like that is a true summary. And if you can do that, then you’re ready to prod it, poke and prod out. You’re ready to show where it falls short. You’re ready to show how the gospel contradicts it. And I, so many times, I listen to a lot of his sermons over the years, and so many times I would hear him say something very direct and confrontational that as an insider to Christianity didn’t always sound confrontational to me. And then I would put myself in the shoes of someone who wasn’t a Christian and I thought, oh, that stung, or that really, that poke, poke in—he would just say things like, I mean, the truth is you’re a sinner. And, but he would say that after having already summarized, you know, their viewpoint so well, and I thought, I remember thinking, he’s really being direct right now. He doesn’t sound angry, but he’s really being direct right now. He doesn’t sound condescending or condemning to that person. It’s not, you’re a sinner. He’s like, the truth is you’re really a sinner. And I know that lands rhetorically, especially if you don’t believe yourself to be a sinner, but it lands because he’s previously understood so well what you do hold and what you do believe.

Dave: And again, if the idea then is to actually win people over, that’s what does it. Otherwise, speaking true things loudly often can just push people away and divide. And now, sometimes in culture—and there are seasons where you do have to just articulate what is and what isn’t—and yet, he did that though in a way that would make it particularly I think interesting for people who still had an open mind to be intrigued by his argument, whatever it is that he was talking about.

Hunter: Okay, so there’re our five themes, gospel renewal, gospel, breath, gospel ministry in postmodern context and cities to postmodern people, simplicity versus celebrity, and how the gospel informs polemics and argument. Maybe we close with this question, Dave. What’s your favorite Tim Keller book?

Dave: Oh gosh. First of all, there are like seven other topics we could talk about that I love about Tim Keller and that have been influential with us. But favorite book, I would say probably *The Reason for God*, because it was the articulation of how do you communicate the gospel towards this culture. And he did on paper all the things we’ve been talking about. So, that and—I can’t just do one—*The Meaning of Marriage*. So, his marriage book, again, applied the gospel in the context of marriage. And we’ve recommended it to a bazillion couples in this church. And so, anyone who’s done marriage counseling or pre-marriage classes in this church, they’ve been forced to read it.

Hunter: Well, since you did two, I’ll do two.

Dave: Only fair.

Hunter: The most intellectually helpful one to me is *Making Sense of God*. It’s probably his least bestseller of a book, and this is a later book he wrote after *The Reason for God*, where he is diagnosing and describing some of the baseline cultural narratives about identity, about personhood, about freedom that most modern and postmodern people have. And then he’s juxtaposing what Christianity says with those. Absolutely the most helpful for me in my own preaching

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ministry and in my own teaching ministry, because I want to understand those cultural narratives in a way that I can do what he did. I can show how the gospel is different and better than those. And he understands them and describes them and has studied them better than I could do on my own. And so, he's helped me go further. What I've discovered when I read that book is I had been reading some of the same things he had read, but all of my exposure to Tim Keller is like, oh, I've been thinking about that too. But you've read 40 books on it, and I read two, you know. And so, he just pushed me further down the path that I was going and really helped me solidify things that the Lord was already doing to me. So, *Making Sense of God* is probably top of my list. I refer to it a lot personally. *The Prodigal God* has been the most personally influential in my own heart and soul. And God used that book at a season of my life in ministry when I was really dissatisfied with how God had sovereignly ordained my life. And I was upset that, you know, He wasn't doing what I thought He should do in exchange for all the hard work that I was doing for Him. And what I really needed was another round of gospel renewal. And I've read that I'd read that book two or three times, and I just was in a season of just stupor and, you know, stewing in my in my angst, and I just read that book. I'm sure it was Spirit-directed to read it. Although I couldn't have discerned that at the time. But I read that book literally in one sitting. I sat there and I read it, and he diagnosed exactly my older brother problem where I had basically- my heart had somehow come out. And I converted to a non-gospel way of relating to the Father, which is I do my part, I be obedient, now you do your part. And that's not the gospel. And God just used that to break me of my pride, of my of my attitude toward Him. And then this is the crazy thing, and not to crush me, but to show me how much He loves me like the father loves that older brother. So, that's the Tim Keller book that that God has used the most in my own heart. And if I think about ministry and life, I'm going *Making Sense of God*, but it's really hard to choose in it.

Dave: It is, it is.

Hunter: Well, Dave, thanks for joining me today. Autumn, we hope you're enjoying sabbatical. And if you do listen to this on your sabbatical, we hope that it's life-giving to you and doesn't feel like work.

Dave: That's right. We love hearing from our listeners. And if you have questions or comments about today's episode, or if this spurred something for you that you would like to hear us devote a conversation to in the future, we would love to hear from you. So, email your thoughts, your questions, and your suggestions to podcast@fellowshipdenver.org.

Autumn: Thanks for joining us on the Vision for Life podcast. Special thanks to Adam Anglin for our theme music, to Jesse Cowan, our producer, and to Judd Connell, who provides transcription for these episodes.