

# **The DNA of Reproducing Churches**

**By Tim Keller, with added material by Tim Vink**

*"The DNA of Reproducing Churches" is a presentation Keller gave at the Exponential '08 conference on April 24, 2008, in Orlando, Florida.*

The essence of becoming a reproducing church is in the dynamics of revival. Keller speaks as a Presbyterian centered on the sovereign grace of God.

In 1991, Keller began a new church plant in Manhattan, New York. Within the first 18 months of Redeemer Presbyterian Church's start, it saw 300 hard-case conversions. We need to recover our trust in the Gospel and understand the real, "all-hands-on-deck" reality of this kind of momentum in a revival. Otherwise, problems arise.

Part of the reason a revival slows down may be that churches can grow converts faster than leaders. Another reason may be an imbalance among the leadership team. In Ephesians 4:11, Paul lists five types of gifted equipping leaders: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. All are necessary in a revival. In the case of Redeemer Presbyterian, Keller is an equipping leader with strong evangelistic and teaching gifts. The church probably didn't have a balance of the other three types of equipping leaders. It also lacked systems for leadership formation. As such, the church was caught off guard by the rapid growth.

Revival is realistic—it takes into account that we are dealing with deadness in our hearts. A revival doesn't happen because of skills, smartness, more education, or more emphasis on the goodness and potential of man. A revival happens because of the Spirit of God, who must have the place of active leadership and supremacy in human lives and churches. It is evident that revivals all over the world are led by the Spirit of God, as there have been many explosive movements since the time of Christ without any of our seminars, skills, or money involved.

The problem today is that we are not alive enough to reproduce. We need the kind of abundant life that only Jesus can bring from heaven through the Spirit of God. Then we will be able to reproduce because of who we are, not because of what we know or what we say. Reproduction can't grow out of mere skills and programs—running a program correctly or efficiently won't ensure

that something happens. Revival happens when the living God is centered in the church and in society.

## **Factors of Revival Dynamics**

### **Three Instruments of Revival**

Leaders have some control over the instruments of revival.

#### **1. A Recovery of the Difference between the Gospel and Religion**

The attitude of religion says: I obey, therefore I am accepted.

The attitude of the gospel says: I am accepted, therefore I obey.

These two attitudes produce radically different results, although both types of people sit in a pew, sing, and give money. Those with the attitude of the gospel are those saved by grace, who gladly come to live, serve, and sing—without the gospel, religion fills in, creating attitudes based on fear and anxiety. The gospel-made church is not control-oriented but delights in letting God be God. The devotion of a church of the gospel is to the presence and person of God, yielding to the third person of the Trinity, our advocate (John 14:16), so that human will and demonic voices or ideas are happily displaced and discounted. The church or person based on religion makes claims on God, demanding rights, saying, "Look what I have surrendered for you, God—you owe me blessings now." The church or person based on the gospel knows that since salvation comes by grace at Christ's expense, there is nothing God can't ask of us. Religion produces touchy people, who are concerned with image and who are defensive and fragile; controlling people, who try to manage a God who "owes" them since they've paid dues; and frustrated people, who try to manage others since life seldom adds up like they'd wanted, who find life unfair, who take offense easily, who place themselves on a throne, and who always ask, "What's in it for me?" The difference between the gospel and religion is at the heart of revival. Secular folks tend to grow much less sure of their secularity when they hear and see the difference between religion and gospel. People in many American churches have a self-salvation sort of view—they don't understand that salvation comes through faith alone. They are continually trying to earn their salvation.

## **2. Extraordinary Prayer**

It is important to have one constant, united, corporate, sustained, extraordinary prayer effort. Work with the faithful remnant. Don't fall into the trap of thinking that more numbers will make God move. Carefully guide and build the circles of grace outward.

## **3. Creativity**

Everything changes. Don't look back at the last revival to get direction for a revival today. Innovation brings change and new ideas. During the First Great Awakening in the 1840s, the main venue was itinerant preaching in open fields. This got people outside of the traditional church box; bands of people met for discipleship outside of typical church and clergy structures. In western New York, the Second Great Awakening grew out of lay-led prayer meetings in the marketplace. Each revival throughout history has happened through a different mechanism. As the professor noted in C.S. Lewis' novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, you can't get into Narnia (or, in this case, revival) the same way twice. As an example, consider the Vineyard church movement in North America. After the death of its founder, John Wimber, in 1997, the movement suffered a clear leadership vacuum and has since struggled to continue creative-edge leadership that draws on renewal and the insights of Christ, Scripture, and the New Testament church. Instead, it has tried to return and do the same things that got the movement started in the 1970s and 1980s. It doesn't work that way—God is ahead of us, not behind us. Today, the media and the internet are strong mediums, just as the printing press was a key innovation during the time of the Reformation.

### **Three Aspects of Revival**

Instruments produce the aspects—leaders have less control over these aspects, and must watch and wait for them to come through the Spirit's power.

#### **1. Nominal Christians are converted**

Intellectual and moral Christians are captured by and fall passionately in love with the Savior, leading to real regeneration. They are no longer selfish or grumpy. They are electrified and convicted through testimony.

#### **2. Sleepy Christians wake up to their true identity and potential in Christ**

Previously lackluster Christians are genuinely saved by Christ and the gospel of grace. Before, their hearts were devoted to small things, leaving no room for the great thing. As a result, their family, job, money, or something else functioned as their savior. When they are genuinely saved, as Romans 8:16 says, "It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." When we receive both inward and outward assurance by the Spirit's intuitive confirmation, we grow bolder and more confident. Consider a father walking with his son. Partway through the walk, the father picks his son up and carries him. Does the son become more of a son when he is in the father's arms? No—there is no change in status, but he is surely enjoying his sonship far more! In a revival, sleepy Christians wake up, and Jesus becomes a true Savior rather than an abstraction. This is especially evident in worship services during a revival—the grace of God shines through his saints.

### **3. Large numbers of non-Christians come to Christ**

Programs don't have the power to draw like this; they mostly draw the already-transformed. During a revival, a deep, welcoming presence is extended to all outsiders. They are shown real compassion, an understanding of their own weakness and sin, and the power of grace for them. A revival isn't scripted or polished; something that appears too polished can make a secular person feel manipulated. When the dynamics of revival are strong, the church becomes contagious.

## **Six Balances of Revival**

Leaders have some control over the following balances of revival.

### **1. Dynamic Worship**

Dynamic worship welcomes and inspires the non-Christian while still edifying the saints. It is neither deep theology that the lost find off-putting nor a seekers' service that is too basic or shallow for those already saved. Dynamic worship is based on the presence of God; everyone connects vertically to God and worships in spirit and in truth. Truly dynamic worship is not about us—it's not about culture, style, or personal preference.

### **2. Strong Preaching and Teaching**

Preachers must make the truth real, not just clear, so that it moves into lives. The message does have to be

clear to be real, but too many sermons are only clear. Strong preaching is described as a transparent, living narrative—the biblical passage comes alive in us in an experiential and transformational manner. It uses baseline cultural narratives that are relevant to the lost, great themes that connect God and people. Testimonials form an important component of strong preaching. Neither personality, nor communication skills, nor oratory prowess can substitute for strong preaching. For example: both John Wesley and George Whitefield preached during the Great Awakening; Wesley preached solely in England, while Whitefield moved to the colonies to continue his ministry. Whitefield was a better speaker than Wesley, but he didn't create systems for discipleship. Wesley, on the other hand, integrated his preaching into daily life, and saw significant, lasting results in contrast to Whitefield's.

### **3. Life-Changing Community**

Community must happen beyond the worship service. We tend to become like the people we spend time with rather than the one we hear preach. We need rich community on a daily basis. A good example of this kind of rich community is the body of believers described in Acts 2:42-47. All levels of society come together under Christ—barriers drop and icy walls melt away in the heat of the presence of God. Unity wins.

### **4. Incredibly Evangelistic**

We must display respect and humility toward the lost, along with a holy boldness. Only the gospel brings both humility and boldness together.

### **5. Passion for Justice and for the Poor**

The last, the least, and the lost hear the good news declared and demonstrated for them. Those with hurts, hang-ups, and habits swell the crowds coming to Jesus for help. The margins become the new center of the spread of abundant life.

### **6. Cultural Engagement**

Faith must be integrated in public life. Consider all seven mountains—church, family, education, business, arts and entertainment, media, and government. A revival is not something pietistic or private; it changes culture.

You can look at these six balances as tributaries of a river. In order to keep the river flowing at maximum strength, it needs to

be fed by all six tributaries. Another metaphor for the six balances is the cylinders in an engine. All six cylinders need to be firing in order for the car to gain speed and momentum. In order to have all six balances, a revival first needs the above instruments and aspects. The movement of a revival is led not by a program, but a person.

#### **Four Results**

Leaders have no control over the results of a revival—they are Spirit-fueled.

Revival dynamics can happen in a church, on a campus, or in a small circle. Keller has seen both in 18-month periods.

##### **1. An Excessive Fringe**

Some people let revival go to their heads. Some aren't ready to shepherd one—either they lack maturity or character, or they burn out. Others get obsessed with the emotional highs. Inevitable divisions and distinctions will be made, since differences will be real and pronounced. Reactions will include plenty of theological and stoic critics who won't check their fears, inexperience, and ignorance. Mental and emotional blocks come from the soul—they are not spiritual.

##### **2. Backlash**

A revival may experience a backlash within the secular culture from those who are losing power or influence. Many secular people may be afraid of a revival, and there may be many who mock those involved with the revival. Jesus faced backlash to his ministry. So did Paul, the Reformation leaders, and many others.

##### **3. Many New Churches Planted**

A large number of new churches will be based on new conversions to Christ and will hunger for authentic discipleship in his ways. These new churches will be very personal and will reproduce rapidly.

##### **4. Real Social Healing**

New institutions will be created and cultural renewal will take place. Social transformation will blossom.

God has many more revivals up his sleeve, but let's not be too utopian. You can't hold onto a revival in the long term. Today's revivals are the forerunners of the great revival, the ultimate spring following a spiritual winter—the new heavens and the new

earth. We are living in the midst of a great worldwide revival in the kingdom of God; the born-again rate is around seven times greater than the world's population growth rate. The world experiences a new Pentecost every 20 minutes, with 3,000 new believers worldwide, many of whom are in China, India, Latin America, and Africa.

In North America today, we often feel like we're herding cats. Americans are harder to lead—they are complex, with strong pride in their place in the world. Many are wealthy, which means they have a lot to lose or to surrender. Americans are the most individualistic people on the earth, and a large portion of the population is Anglo. Non-whites tend to be more willing to support their leaders in the community. Other parts of the world, such as Africa and Latin America, do not have these dynamics blocking revival. As a result, movements begin there far more easily and spread more widely.

The Protestant minister Martyn Lloyd-Jones grew up during the Welsh revival of 1904- 1905. During his twenties and thirties, the majority of the people in the churches were converts from the revival years who were now causing stagnation within the churches because they would not change again. The converts wanted to hold onto the emotionally charged change of their early salvation years. This refusal to change is a very dangerous pattern. We have to be able to respond to people like this in churches, people who love their history more than their future calling. They need to know that we want them to stay, but they will not be allowed to have their way with a revival. They do not own the church, the revival, or the lost—God does.

Revival is more theologically driven than program driven, but it is still an application of the theology that builds momentum. In physics, the formula for momentum is mass multiplied by velocity. In a revival, mass is both the quality and quantity of people moving in unity together, while velocity is the alignment of our direction in obedience to the Spirit of God.

How do we consistently clarify the gospel in order to get it from the inside out? Don't go into the ministry to save your soul. Don't make any external thing your justification rather than Jesus. Allow yourself to grow to new levels of poise and grace, and rest in the gospel.

**What is the Gospel?**

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16). The gospel is the power of God in verbal form. It always requires verbal proclamation.

Today, the Christian world is often unsure what the gospel is. This became very clear in the 1960s with the promotion of the four spiritual laws: first, that God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life; second, that all of us are sinful and separated from God, therefore we cannot know and experience God's love and plan for our life; third, that Jesus Christ is God's only provision for our sin; and fourth, that we must individually accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. These four laws are reflected in Billy Graham's "Steps to Peace with God" and the Roman Road to salvation, consisting of a group of Bible verses from Romans that together explain how to be saved. But these were a rather reductionistic version of the gospel.

Neo, one of the main characters in Brian McLaren's book *A New Kind of Christian*, rejects this notion. He feels that the modern world has produced an overly abstract and simplistic view of sin, and that one can't really reduce the gospel beyond the gospel of the kingdom of God in Matthew, Mark, and Luke and Paul's epistles with their message of justification by faith.

Some see divergence in the gospel presented in the New Testament, while others see convergence—the debate rages. The truth is that the New Testament is one gospel with multiple expressions of that gospel—these expressions are facets of the same diamond, or two sides of the same coin.

In Galatians 1:6-8, Paul vehemently defends the one gospel, saying, "I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to another gospel—not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are confusing you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!" Then, in Galatians 2:7, Paul says that the gospel for the Gentiles (the uncircumcised) was entrusted to him, while the gospel for the Jews (the circumcised) was entrusted to the apostle Peter. From this, we realize that contextualization shapes the expression of the gospel over major cultural divides.

In 1 Corinthians 1:22-25, Paul preaches the gospel as weakness to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks. He connects the

gospel to the baseline cultural narratives of both major groups. For the Jews, this is power, action, and change—"God's weakness is stronger than human strength." For the Greeks, this is wisdom, intellect, speculation, and philosophy—"God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom." The gospel both confronts and completes the baseline cultural narrative of each group. It hits the balance correctly by confronting and yet inviting. Jesus completes the story of your culture and the longing of your heart. If you think of it in this way, the gospel can take many forms in different contexts. Conservatives like to talk of one gospel with very little contextualization, while others who are more sensitive to culture speak of multiple gospels—neither is correct. There is only one gospel, but it can speak differently in the context of different cultural narratives.

This is the tripod of the gospel: first, in Jesus Christ, God emptied himself and became human. The incarnation and humanity of Christ is crucial. Jesus' life example of humility, serving, healing, and delivering is to be our model. Second, God atoned for our sins through Christ's death on the cross and his resurrection. Salvation is all about grace, not works. Third, God will bring about a new heaven and a new earth. In this new heaven and earth, all things will be renewed and peace and justice will reign. The synoptic gospels, Paul's epistles, and John's gospel each speak of all three of these things as gospel, even if their specific emphasis varies.

Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, focused on the four spiritual laws. Billy Graham's messages focus more on part two of the tripod than parts one or three—Paul's epistles are often the texts of reference. Real corporate effects and goals of the gospel include emphases on the kingdom of God, social justice initiatives, peace and reconciliation, and cultural transformation. Liberal or emergent churches tend to place a lot of emphasis on these goals. Worldwide charismatic renewal and Pentecostal movements restore a major emphasis on the first part of the gospel tripod—the gospel of the kingdom as declared and demonstrated by Jesus and his disciples through healing and deliverance. We must remember to teach the whole story of Jesus for the whole gospel.

**Resources:**

- "The Gospel of Paul and the Gospel of the Kingdom," in *God's Power to Save*, edited by Chris Green
- "The Gospel in All Its Forms," by Tim Keller

# Don't Shrink the Gospel of God

## The Kingdom of Heaven Is at Hand

Three different realities:

- 1. Upside-Down Kingdom—incarnation:** Jesus gave away his power and emptied his glory to save us. In the upside-down kingdom, there is deep community; people are served, racism is undone, the poor are fed, the blind see, the lame walk, and lepers are cleansed. The synoptic gospels put emphasis here, as do John and Acts. This shows the full humanity and compassion of Jesus.
- 2. Inside-Out Kingdom—atonement:** This brings the gospel, rather than religion, to bear on our hearts. God substitutes himself for us—sin is when we try to substitute ourselves for God. Conviction leads to repentance for your righteousness—your attempts at self-salvation—not just your sins. The Pharisees were very concerned about repentance, too, but they stopped short of repentance from self-righteousness. There is more focus in the inside-out kingdom on the inner, spiritual change in people, and on the development of Christian identity. These ideas can be used to catechize youth who grow up in the church. They can also be used in pre-discipleship if conversion and new birth have not yet been realized. Paul's epistles explain paradigm changes in identity, destiny, and community.
- 3. Downside-Up Kingdom—transformation:** This reality holds powerful resurrection and ascension themes of community transformation and nation-building. Jesus will return to restore all things, bringing the new heavens and the new earth. Faith and work will be integrated in care for creation, justice for the poor, and the seven mountain strategy. The synoptic gospels and Acts focus on this reality, as do the stories of Israel in the Old Testament.

When preaching, you don't have to stress all three points at the same time. When leaders preached in Acts, they seldom preached on all three at once; usually, they emphasized one point another, in the context of the people. There is a gospel for the circumcised and for the uncircumcised. If you preach through the Bible expositionally, there will be diversity in your preaching, and people will be touched every time. People are often narrow in their understanding—diverse preaching can help them come out of their culture and look for points of connection. Sometimes it

hits them square in the heart, and other times they are overhearing the gospel, but all of it is true.

We create imbalanced churches if we only preach our favorite passages, passages we are comfortable with, or passages that people understand best. We have to preach all the text.

Examples for incarnational preaching: A cosmonaut didn't see God in space, so he claimed that there is no God. C.S. Lewis responded that one would not meet God in that way. It's like a tenant in a house going upstairs and expecting to meet the landlord. When the landlord isn't upstairs, the tenant decides there must not be a landlord. Meeting God in his creation is more like meeting Shakespeare through Hamlet—the author writes himself into the story to be seen. Author Dorothy Sayers wrote herself into her own stories in the persona of Harriet Vane so that she could fall in love with the character she created, Lord Peter Wimsey. Likewise, God wrote himself into his creation in order to be with us and love us. He could not stay outside the creation he made and yet truly love and be loved by us.

An example for atonement and substitution preaching from Charles Dickens' novel *A Tale of Two Cities*: Charles Darnay is imprisoned in France and sentenced to be guillotined. Sydney Carton, who looks remarkably like Darnay, sneaks into the Bastille and offers to take Darnay's place. When Darnay refuses, Carton drugs him, smuggles him out of the prison, and takes his place anyway. Carton makes the ultimate sacrifice so that Darnay's wife and small child don't lose their husband and father. A woman in prison with Carton realizes that the switch has been made. Carton holds her hand and helps her face her own impending death. Even though the substitution wasn't intended for her, it changed her life. How much more life-changing it must have been for Darnay, since it was done for him!

N. T. Wright, a senior bishop in the Church of England, wrote that even if you can't believe in the resurrection, you should wish it to be true. The message of the resurrection in this world matters, because then hope and healing win. It warms our heart because it is just not about warming our hearts—it's bigger than us. We have Easter, and we have the resurrection, which changes everything. It is not dreamy wish-fulfillment, as Freud claimed; it is not a crutch for the weak, as Nietzsche argued; and it is not, as Marx said, the illusory happiness of the people. It is God's gospel, the good news of great joy for all of humanity.

Remember that western culture tends to be propositional and intellectual. The gospel can be lost if we try to hold on to it propositionally, since the truth is a person. The gospel is receiving the whole person of Christ with his whole story and all its facets, from incarnation to substitution to ascension. Follow Him!