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Total Church:

A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community

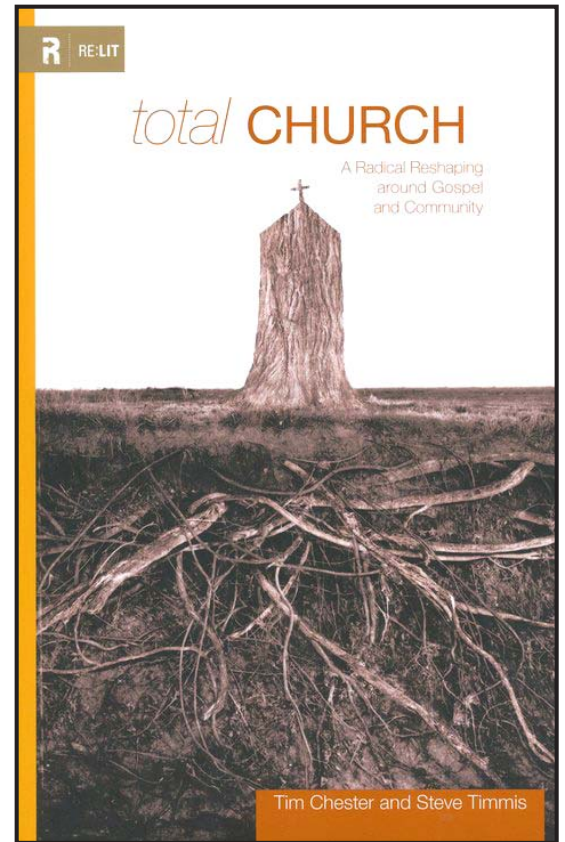
A Quick Focus

The Book's Purpose

- Propose a new model of doing church based on the principles of gospel and community
- Portray the church as our identity in Christ, not just another responsibility to be juggled
- Show "total church" in action by sharing true stories from The Crowded House located in the United Kingdom
- Explain the practical ways "total church" is fleshed out in discipleship, evangelism, church planting, social action, pastoral care, and all the other objectives of local congregations

The Book's Message

Many churches successfully preach the gospel message, but they have very little involvement with the community. Other churches do well ministering to the community, but they water down the truth of the gospel. Is there a way to be both a strong gospel-centered and a strong community-centered church? The authors assert that the answer is yes. The "total church" is enthusiastic and intentional about both truth and relationship. Chester and Timmis turn to the Bible to show how church can be a daily experience where believers go deeper in their faith and where nonbelievers connect. *Total Church* looks at shaping the whole of life not merely creating a place where one attends each week.



by Tim Chester and Steve Timmis
Crossway
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The Gospel Principle

People outside the faith want some kind of proof that God exists. People of faith think that apologetic arguments persuade people. But the way we know God is through His words. Everything in Christian ministry must be centered around the gospel.

Word-Centered

God always rules through His word. It was God's word that brought creation into being. Adam and Eve were to express their commitment to God by trusting His promises. They fell from God's grace when they rejected His word. God called Abraham and spoke a word of promise that he and his people would be greatly blessed. After God liberated His people from Egypt, He gave them the words of the Law spoken through Moses on Mount Sinai. Ruth's story is a beautiful portrait of how God's word liberates. God raised up prophets to bring His disobedient people back to His word.

Look at the ministry of Jesus. He heals the sick and casts out demons with a word. With a word, people leave their careers and follow Him. And John 1:1 reminds us that Jesus the Messiah is the Word.

Today, Christ rules the church through His word. What is the only required skill of church leaders? They must be able to teach, handling and applying the word with great skill. Their only authority is one that is mediated through the authority of Christ. That mediated authority manifests itself not by virtue of position but through the teaching of the word.

Mission-Centered

God continues to extend His rule in the world through His word. This fact makes Christianity mission-centered. How does His kingdom grow? According to the Parable of the Sower, it grows as people hear and accept His word. In the book of Acts the word of God increased and spread (6:7; 12:24). Preaching the gospel spreads the word of God. *"The growth of God's kingdom is synonymous with the spread of God's word. The kingdom grows through the word as it elicits faith."*

Unhealthy Polarizations

Some people tend to polarize churches into word-centered or Spirit-centered, as if the churches can't be both. Such polarization is neither healthy nor accurate. The two do not conflict. Churches must be both.

Another unhealthy polarization is between intellectualism and emotionalism—what one thinks matters versus what one feels matters. We need to look no further than the book of Psalms to support the importance of emotion in worship. Faith must be felt as well as understood. In the Bible the Spirit and the word always go together.

Both word and Spirit are involved in the Christian experience. Jesus promised that the Spirit would come to teach the believer all things. The Spirit is the one who reveals Christ's words to us and then applies them to our lives. The word of God is the very breath (Spirit) of God. To see the Spirit of God work, we must proclaim God's word.

Summary

To summarize the gospel principle, we must understand two dimensions of being gospel-centered. First, because the gospel is a word, it must be word-centered. "Jesus is Lord" are the words that give new life to people and shape the direction of the church. The gospel is a message of good news.

Second, to be gospel-centered also implies being mission-centered. The good news must be proclaimed because the gospel is a missionary word. The challenge for every believer is to make the gospel the focus of our lives seven days a week, not just on Sundays. We need believers to *"model whole-life, gospel-centered, missional living."*

"You cannot be committed to the gospel without being committed to proclaiming that gospel."

CBS

The Community Principle

Just as the word is central to the gospel mission, so also is the community. We experience salvation whenever by faith we become a part of the community of people for whom Jesus died.

Central to Christian Identity

One of the weaknesses in our Western culture is overemphasizing our individual identity. Certainly the Bible teaches that we are children of God and the place where

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THE COMMUNITY PRINCIPLE

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His Spirit dwells. But the Bible also teaches that we are communal, a people created to love God and to love others.

Genesis reminds us that God Himself is a social being (“Let *us* make man”). The only thing that wasn’t good about creation is that Adam was alone. God created man with the inner need to relate to others. Perhaps the greatest culture gap that today’s church needs to bridge is the chasm that exists between the community principle and the individualistic worldview.

Once I decide to follow Christ, I’m suddenly a part of the Christian community. My identity is not just connected to Christ but also connected to every other believer. Why would we ever seek to live as disembodied Christians if, indeed, the church is the body of Christ?

Koinonia is the New Testament word used for this community principle. We make the word anemic when we translated it “fellowship.” Closely connected to *koinonia* are our English words *participation*, *common*, and *sharing*. Scanning Paul’s letters reveals that the word is used to refer to our community with the Son, sharing our property and our lives, and sharing in Christ’s suffering. We celebrate community when we share together (*koinonia*) the body and blood of our Lord.

There is a huge disconnect between the biblical model and the prevailing views of today. This disconnect results in an individualistic approach that sees church as merely one compartment among many. We end up juggling church attendance in the same way we juggle work and leisure. Instead, we should see all of life’s activities as spokes on a wheel with the Christian community as the hub.

“Church is not another ball for me to juggle but that which defines who I am and gives Christ-like shape to my life.”

One way we must flesh this out in our daily lives is in the area of decision-making. Typically, we see people making decisions as individual choices. The community principle suggests that decisions should be made in the context of the church. The community approach is expected at The Crowded House. We believe the implications regarding the church should be considered when significant decisions are made. We’re not talking about a heavy-handed shepherd’s making decisions for families. We’re talking about the Christian family making decisions together.

Central to Christian Mission

God’s primary method of doing mission is through His covenant people. God made us in His own image so that we would represent Him on earth. But sin brought God’s curse upon us and fractured the human community. With His promise to Abraham God set forth plans to create a new humanity. Abraham’s family would become the instruments through which God’s grace would shine to the world.

In Exodus, we read that God called the nation of Israel to be a kingdom of priests, a kingdom with the missionary role of proclaiming God to the nations and bringing them to experience the blessings of atonement.

Unfortunately, Israel did not live up to God’s plan. Instead, they were drawn to the wicked ways of the other nations. Isaiah looks beyond Israel’s unfaithfulness to the day when the nations would be drawn to God’s rule.

Interestingly, Matthew begins his Gospel by describing Jesus as the son of Abraham. God would bless all the nations through His Son. Jesus ended His earthly ministry by commissioning His followers to be God’s light to all the nations. The center of the mission is no longer located in Jerusalem. The center now is the Christian community. The church moves outward to tell the world about Jesus, all the while seeking to draw people to the Lord through its common life.

Summary

As human beings, our identity is found in community. As Christians, our identity is discovered in Christ’s new community. And our mission is realized as we become communities of light to a lost world.

CBS

The Evangelism Model

Why is it that people cringe when we talk about evangelism? After all, believers have an inner desire to tell others about Jesus. But this desire diminishes when it comes to the actual task of doing it.

Centrality of the Gospel Word

There seems to be a growing tendency to promote a type of evangelism absent of proclamation. Those in this camp cling to St. Francis’ famous words, “Preach the gospel always; if necessary use words.” This mind-set falls far short of biblical teaching. How did Jesus begin His ministry? By proclaiming the good news. Today, many do acts of service or invite people to worship and call it evangelism.

Without words of explanation, these approaches become signposts that lead to nowhere. The gospel is good news. We must proclaim

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it, teach the truth, and tell our story. We must call people to repentance and not just focus on how Jesus can meet personal needs.

Centrality of the Gospel Community

In the hours prior to going to the cross, Jesus taught His closest followers the centrality of the gospel community. The central focus of His teaching was that the disciples were to love one another the same way that He loved them. And that love led to the cross. Love was the test of discipleship. They were to be lovers of one another before being preachers and church planters.

The test of whether or not we are truly experiencing the power of the gospel word is not found in our doctrinal orthodoxy, astute strategizing, solid preaching, or innovative church planting. The dynamic test is how we demonstrate cross-love to one another. It is this love that proclaims the gospel word to a skeptical and watching world. That is evangelism.

Some tactics used today may try to pass for evangelism, such as street work or door-to-door outreach. But these methods seek to share the word without sharing life. Genuine evangelism requires both—sharing life and sharing the word. Certainly we should be ready to share the truth at any moment the opportunity arises. But “total church” evangelism is most effective when it is done in the context of a gospel community.

When people encounter the church, they should witness the unique cross-love being fleshed out among its members. We need to build personal relationships with unbelievers. But as a next step we also need to introduce them to the community of believers so they can experience genuine Christianity in action.

A Simple Model for Evangelism

The Crowded House has adopted a very simple model for evangelism. We use the analogy of three strands of a piece of rope. To reach people for Christ, we seek to build relationships, share the gospel, and introduce them to the gospel community.

We are careful not to impose a logical sequence in this model. Any one of the three strands can come first. And it is not necessary to progress in one strand before moving to another. Actually, all three can happen simultaneously. With two strands the rope can still hold; but it is much stronger when three strands are present.

Ordinary Evangelism

Evangelism can happen in the major events. But the bedrock for evangelism involves ordinary people in their ordinary flow of life intentionally seeking to minister the gospel word in both word and deed. However, this “ordinary” approach will never be effective unless there is a saturated commitment to live and proclaim the gospel. Otherwise, the result is a good relationship that is going nowhere. We intentionally seek to build relationships on others’ turf. We don’t seek to force the gospel down people’s throat on day one. But we do seek to build the relationship to the point that we can share the gospel truth.

“People have rejected the gospel word in part because they have not been exposed to credible gospel community. Churches have often stood aloof from society.”

CBS

The Church Planting Model

Church planting is the point where mission intersects with community. It is the core missionary activity of the church.

Mission at the Core of Christian Community

Some say that worship is the church’s central focus. Certainly it is true that the church has been formed to worship our Lord. But Christ left the church with the task of taking the gospel to the ends of the earth. Actually mission is worship and worship is mission.

Unfortunately, for many congregations mission has become simply one activity among many. It competes for attention alongside all the other things that a church does. Pulling together worship services is a difficult task to accomplish every week. Consequently, mission activity becomes the assignment of just a small number of enthusiasts.

Over the years, churches form one committee after another, thereby putting them in the mode of maintenance instead of mission. Somehow we must shift into mission mode. Everything we do must be done with a missional focus. Church planting is the best way to make this shift.

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Christian Community at the Core of Mission

God focuses His purpose on His people, not on a large collection of unrelated individuals. His Son died for the church. The Bible's story centers on how God is forming a new humanity who will be His people. So, the Christian community should be at the core of mission.

It is not that the universal church is unimportant. But studying the New Testament shows clearly that the work of God took place through the local community of believers. Therefore, the local church must lie at the core of mission practice. ***"There can be no sustainable Christian mission without sustainable local communities."***

The Apostolic Approach

The New Testament demonstrates two models of planting churches. One model occurs without an existing local congregation. Paul used this model when he planted a church in a city that did not already have a Christian community. The other model occurs when one church gives birth to another.

These apostolic churches thrived on reproducing churches. From the beginning, they met in homes. Not until much later did churches meet in buildings specifically constructed for the gathering of believers. The churches did not continuously add members to become the "mega" variety. No, they formed other house churches. For example, we see this strategy clearly in Corinth where Paul formed a number of house churches rather than creating one huge congregation.

There is a lot of merit for this apostolic approach to church planting. The pattern of household churches provides the best way to express the biblical principles of community. In the New Testament, church and household became synonymous. If potential leaders could not manage their families, they were not fit to care for God's church. If false teachers appeared, the church leaders were not to welcome them into their house.

Our point here is not to blast the value of large churches with massive buildings. The point is that the apostolic congregations grew; then they formed other house churches, eventually growing into a network of small communities that had the ability to safeguard the biblical principles of church life.

Summary

The expression for "church planting" comes from 1 Corinthians 3. In this text, it is clear that the gospel lies at the heart of planting new churches. The Corinthians believers were dividing over secondary issues and had lost sight of the gospel purpose.

Books on church planting are filled with practical insights, techniques, and strategies. But Paul simply reminds us of the sufficiency of the gospel message of the crucified Christ. People give their lives to Christ, and God causes the church to grow.

The best model for church planting is the one in which the primary concern is gospel-centered communities. These communities become the natural expression and expansion of the gospel. Our task must be to create a culture in which planting new congregations becomes the norm.

"Church planting should be at the forefront of new ecclesiological thinking."

The Discipleship and Training Model

Just like evangelism, the central focus of discipleship is the gospel word and the gospel community. We have a responsibility to help one another become better followers of Jesus. The Great Commission teaches that we are to make disciples of all nations. The means by which we help people become disciples are baptism and teaching.

Baptizing into the Gospel Community

Baptism tells the story of how one has died to the old way of living and the old set of values and has risen to a new way of living with a new set of values. Baptism is not a private event. It is a communal affair. The communal act of baptism marks one's entry into the family of God. It is in this family that the believer can love, care for, encourage, forgive, and even rebuke. It is also in this family that the believer can be loved, cared for, encouraged, forgiven, and even rebuked.

Anyone can form a club and get along with its members. But it takes a lot of grace, hard work, and shared vision to form a community. In fact, becoming a community is a miraculous work that only God can do. But it is in this realm that sinful people can be transformed into true disciples.

Teaching the Gospel Word

We all know that it is the family that provides the primary influence on a child. Most of what a child learns from his parents does not come in the form of sit-down teaching sessions. Formation happens during the normal situations of life. It happens in daily conversa-

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tions and in misbehavior and failure, those occasions that reveal the nature of our hearts.

Weekly sermons should be a major influence in teaching the gospel word. But being a word-centered ministry involves far more than a pastor's sermon. How much evidence is there in the New Testament for the sermon as we know it today? Very little. Jesus taught the gospel in synagogues, but most of His teaching came in homes and in open-air settings. The book of Acts contains sermons, but most of them were spur-of-the-moment speeches to defend the faith.

Teaching the gospel word can happen in a sermon, a Bible study, a meeting of two people to read the Bible together, and in informal conversations. Teaching the gospel word can take place in formal and informal sessions. It happens as the Bible is used to speak to the problems and challenges of daily life. However, we must remember that teaching should always lead to application. Without application, true teaching is not happening.

Teaching and Training along the Road

This view of discipleship is not just a New Testament phenomenon. It has its roots in the Old Testament Jewish faith. The model of discipleship is summarized in Deuteronomy 6:4-9, where love for God is fleshed out in the normal comings and goings of daily life. In no way does this diminish the need for formal church teaching. But it does emphasize the need to take the gospel word out of the pulpit and enmesh it into all of life.

“The gospel word should be central to a formal meeting, but it also has to be the heart of all we do as the people of God and how we relate to the world.”

Truth is not learned in formal settings because it is dynamic in nature. Outside of relationships truth cannot be adequately taught. Incarnating truth is the goal. The method of accomplishing this goal is discipleship. And discipleship requires relationships. The strategy is to talk about one's relationship with God and to serve the needs of others everywhere and all day long.

These same thoughts apply to the training of leaders for the gospel community. It is imperative that we change our paradigms from formal theological education to apprenticeships in the context of gospel ministry. Is this not how Jesus trained disciples? Didn't His followers learn the best through on-the-job training? Most of these early followers did not have formal education or sharp ministerial skills. Their primary qualification was that they had a relationship with Jesus.

Paul received the best education possible. Yet when he listed the qualities for Christian leaders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, the only skill he listed was the ability to teach, and this didn't necessarily imply formal teaching. His list included things like being godly, being a good example, and having spiritual maturity.

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The Pastoral Care Model

How does pastoral care happen in the “total church”? When special issues arise, our first inclination is usually to refer the person to a professional counselor. But the best place to start is with the word of God skillfully handled by the people of God. As long as people are encouraged to seek professional help, they will never learn to depend on their normal relationship connections for healing. In the “total church,” commitment to the gospel word and the gospel community provides the framework within which effective pastoral care can take place.

The Gospel Word and Pastoral Care

The gospel word doesn't give an analysis of the human condition; it also reveals responsible and effective treatment. It is a mistake to create a dichotomy between gospel teaching and pastoral counseling. The Bible provides us with the final authority on matters that relate to faith and conduct. It addresses how to live a life that brings pleasure and honor to God as well as how to handle the full spectrum of problems we face in life (2 Peter 1:3-4).

This doctrine of the sufficiency of the Scriptures gives us the confidence we need as we teach the gospel to each other. Yet there are others who think that the major issues of life need to be handled in a more sophisticated, professional kind of way. The “total church” concept does not ignore the value of the professional counselor in some cases. But for the most part, no matter how complicated the issues may be, through the gospel word, people have the resources they need to respond in a godly way.

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When dealing with people facing cancer, job loss, moral failure, or depression, one of our roles, of course, is to give sympathy. But the role extends far beyond that. At the root of all the issues we face is the fact that we live in a fallen world and we suffer the consequences of human sin. But still, as the 2 Peter 1 passage reminds us, we have all we need for life and godliness. In the gospel word we have all the tools we need to provide pastoral care to others.

The gospel word pierces the soul and brings conviction. It penetrates us to the core and reveals to us the root problems of our belief and behavior. The emotional issues we face are essentially the result of our failure to trust in the promises of God.



“Pastoral care is therefore first and foremost the ability to address the gospel word to the problems of people’s lives.

The Gospel Community and Pastoral Care

Providing pastoral care in the context of the gospel community is not just one therapy option among many. It is the very means God has designed for us to deal with life’s issues. Healthy engagement with others in the context of a community of believers can provide the care needed to deal with issues and their underlying causes.

Take the issue of marriage. In a marriage in which partners are so closely bound together, problems are bound to surface. There is no better place for the relationship to be nurtured than in the gospel community. For one thing, it is in the gospel community that we learn what it means to relate to one another. For another thing, it is in the gospel community

that marriages can find the needed support structures and thereby flourish.

Pastoral Care in the Ordinary

The most and best of pastoral care occurs in the ordinary flow of life. But for it to be effective we must be intentional in our efforts to exhort and encourage at every opportunity. It is in this environment that many issues can be prevented. Yet when the issues do occur, the climate has already been created for pastoral care to flourish.

Take the issue of anxiety. The person may doubt God’s control over his or her future or His gracious forgiveness. In this context, we help the person understand how God’s sovereignty and graciousness tie in directly to his or her pastoral needs.

Life often becomes painful, messy, and difficult. And it is during these times that *“there is no better place to be than among the people of God when the word of God is skillfully applied by the Spirit of God!”*

CBS

A Fresh Way of Measuring Success

To become effective in reaching cities with the gospel through church planting will require a new paradigm of success. Today’s success is measured by numbers, style, and staff. The pastor with the largest congregation and the flashiest worship is the most successful.

Two Growth Models

Large churches are in vogue today because people measure success by size. The “total church” concept suggests smaller congregations because we believe that smaller churches are better able to live out the “one another” teachings of the Bible. But that doesn’t mean we are opposed to larger churches. There are certain advantages larger churches have that smaller ones don’t. But we challenge the assumption that says large churches are better than small ones.

Actually, growing a large church is not that difficult. Just cater to people’s desires. Tickle their ears. Put on a good, entertaining performance each Sunday. Teach the members how to be successful. And don’t focus a lot on the cross and on idolatrous behavior. Do these things, and chances are your church will boom.

We’re not saying that larger congregations are unfaithful to God and His word. However, we are saying that the model of growing a church to get as many members as possible is not the best biblical approach. The model most closely connected to biblical teachings is the model of planting new churches. As long as the size of our church is the main focus, there will always be a deterrent to planting new congregations.

Two Leadership Models

One model of leadership focuses on performance. Worship, sermons, administration, and publications

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all have to be done with the highest excellence. Even the architecture in most churches promotes the performance model. The crowd is in the pews while the ministers perform on stage. If the minister doesn't perform well, he can be replaced with a much-more-sought-after star performer.

There is a better model, and it is taught in the Bible. This model, based on Ephesians 4:11-13, focuses on enabling instead of performing. The pastor does not do all the work. He equips God's people to do the ministering. When every person serves as a minister, the Body of Christ is built up and edified.

The enabling model takes the pressure of performing off the pastor. Why? Because his life is an open book to the congregation. The whole church succeeds or fails, not just the pastor. The whole congregation assumes responsibility for what happens. Moreover, this model's primary focus is not on a single event on Sunday morning. It focuses on a lifestyle that is word-centered every day. The Crowded House is a group of messy people leading a group of messy people.

Two Success Models

The church is always tempted toward a glory model of ministry that takes the form of large buildings, charismatic pastors, and political influence. But that, of course, is not the model God designed. The biblical model is one that is focused on the cross. In this model power is found in weakness, and glory is found in shame. To live out this model means that we focus on the crucified Christ even if it means we live in obscurity.

We need to eliminate our obsession with numbers and size. We need to change our worldly definition of success and live out a model based on God's kingdom perspective. Success is not necessarily seen. The crown of righteousness was not promised to those who lead large churches. It was promised to those who are faithful to Christ and His word. For the most part, Christ is building His church today in the form of a multitude of small congregations.

“There is only one key to successful ministry, and it is in God's hands. In the light of sovereign grace, we work, we pray, and we do not lose heart.

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