



BONUS EPISODE

A Conversation with Tim Keller

Mike Cospers sits down with Tim Keller for reflections on leadership, the trouble with networks, and the essential need for communion with God.

SHOW NOTES

Tim Keller moved to New York City in 1989 to plant Redeemer Presbyterian Church. In the three decades since, he's become one of the most influential voices in American evangelicalism. Several of his books have become bestsellers. *City to City*, the church planting network he co-founded, has planted more than 800 churches. He also co-founded The Gospel Coalition (TGC), an alliance of pastors and theologians with a shared theological vision. Today, TGC hosts events around the world, draws thousands to its national conferences, and publishes resources online that serve millions of readers, viewers, and listeners.

In this conversation, Keller reflects on the challenges of movements, denominations, and networks, as well as his connections with Mark Driscoll, both at the Spanish River Church Network and in The Gospel Coalition. He talks about the limits of institutions, as well as the limits of accountability, and how the only reliable way to guard your heart in ministry is a wholehearted commitment to the pursuit of God in prayer.

This conversation was recorded in early May, 2022.

Books mentioned:

[The Democratization of American Christianity](#)

[Habits of the Heart](#)

[Communion with God](#)

MASTHEAD

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Mike Cospers: Throughout the production of this podcast, there were a handful of people we really hoped would talk to us, both inside and outside of Mars Hill. Near the top of that list was Dr. Timothy Keller. Tim's the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, which he planted in 1989 in where he served until 2017. He's also the co-founder of City to City, a nonprofit focused on training pastors and planting churches in global cities. To date, they've helped plant more than 800 churches. He's the author of several bestselling books and he's considered an authority on church planting, but I think his greatest impact and the thing most people know him for is his preaching. It's not flashy, no Ferrari's on stage, no yelling. It's sober, even professorial. But what he's demonstrated for 30 years is a way of reading and understanding the world and community around him, wrestling with the ideas of skeptics and critics, and demonstrating that the gospel has a way of answering our questions and meeting our deepest needs.

🐦 @timkellernyc

Tim Keller: You see why elder brother lostness and younger brother lostness are both terrible. Younger brother lostness with its self indulgence in it, is an addiction. It brings a lot of misery into the world. But elder brother lostness, you can see it. Look at his anger, he's always angry. Why is he angry? Because he's lived such a good life that God, the Father, owes him to do things his way. And of course, since your life never, except for a few years at a time, ever goes the way you want. If you're living a good life because you think that therefore I deserve a good life, you're always going to have an undercurrent of anger. You're always gonna be looking down on other people. According to Jesus' definition, religion is the source of a tremendous amount of misery and strife in this world.

Mike Cospers: I wanted to talk to Tim for two reasons. First, because of his connections to Mark Driscoll. Their ministries intersected at two significant moments. First in the nineties when Driscoll was just starting out, and then almost a decade later, when Keller was the co-founder of the Gospel Coalition with D.A. Carson. Second, though, is a larger question. Tim pastored Redeemer for almost three decades and has had a front row seat to witness the leadership crisis that we're talking about on this series. I wanted to hear him reflect on it, to talk about where he thinks things have gone wrong, and to ask about how he's guarded his own life and character in the midst of it. It's important to mention that for two years, Tim has been battling pancreatic cancer. This conversation was recorded in early May, and in the time since, that battle has continued, including some particularly difficult moments. I'm incredibly grateful that Tim made time for this conversation, and all of us here at CT join his family, friends, and the community at Redeemer in praying for his restored health and strength.

From Christianity Today, you're listening to the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill. I'm Mike Cospers, and today's episode is an in-depth conversation with Tim Keller.

I know you were around Spanish River when Mark first showed up, so you had a perspective on this sort of all the way through. I'd love to hear you just reflect on the story. What were some of your first impressions with Mark, and how did you end up involved, connected with him more deeply as he came into TGC?

Tim Keller: The Spanish River Network, which was started by David Nicholas, has actually done a lot of good. He's done... It's planted a lot of churches. And what David looked for was his own understanding of dynamic leadership. It meant decisive, vision caster, he

had a whole list. And what he wanted to do was he wanted to find those most dynamic leaders and in a sense, privilege them, promote them, fund them, give them the freedom to get out there and do their thing. And he started that largely... It was largely a PCA - Presbyterian Church in America - thing. He then took those of us that he decided that we were leaders, and he funded us, and then he would get us together every year back at Spanish River for their big missions conference. That was a big, big, big deal. He was frustrated though, with those of us that he funded, for this reason: He wanted very much to create a network that he called Acts 29. That was his name.

What he wanted was, he said, I want these great churches, these churches that are growing with these great leaders, and I want them to put 10% of their income every year into a pot, and then we're gonna go out and get other leaders and we're gonna...We're gonna just plant churches everywhere.

And the reason why all of us always pushed back on that was this. I said, David, you don't have a vision for any particular place or any particular kind of church. So for example, when you plant a church in New York City, you have a vision for planting other churches in New York City. David didn't actually have a working philosophy of the kind of church he wanted, and that was actually good because he never controlled you. If he thought you were doing well, or he thought you were a good leader, he just... It was very interesting, he was not controlling at all. He just stood back. But if I could criticize him, I would say it was almost like he made an idol out of the dynamic leader. It was like, if you're the dynamic leader, I don't care what you wanna do, I'll fund it. And because none of us wanted to create that what we would consider a nondescript church planting network that just basically funded the top dog, big dog kind of people who could plant big churches, and we really wanted to have our own movements in particular places with bigger churches, smaller churches - also David liked big churches, of course - that's when Mark Driscoll and other friends were brought in.

I remember the year that he brought them in, he started funding them, and we were displaced basically. The older Presbyterian guys who he had funded over the years that he brought us down there and put us on a platform and showed us around, he dropped us. Not...It wasn't all that bad in a way, because most of us wanted to move on, and he really went after hot shots. He wanted people that were brash, that were...David liked that. And so Mark actually just utterly fit the bill. So there was an overlap of a year, I think, or maybe two even, where he was there and we were there, but then we were trumped basically.

So I've had people tell me, you platformed Mark Driscoll - you can talk about TGC later on. But the point, is I was displaced by Mark Driscoll.

Mike Cosper: It leads to a question actually for me, because that would've been the sort of late 90s, '97, '98, something like that, I think. And I'm curious because you had gone to seminary, you had been in ministry for... I guess to clarify your background too might be helpful. You pastored for, was it 10 years before you planted Redeemer? Is that correct?

Tim Keller: Actually, I pastored for nine years and then I taught at Westminster Seminary for five.

Mike Cospers: Because there's a major kind of sea change that happens starting in the mid, late 1980s, but by the late 90s it's really humming in terms of the way evangelical churches think about leadership in general, right?

Tim Keller: Yeah.

Mike Cospers: This is the day of Bill Hybels, and Jack Welch is talking about what a great leader he is. And so the models are shifting pretty dramatically. How were you processing that shift in sort of language and emphasis at the time?

Tim Keller: First of all, with rolling my eyes. Two things. One is, I don't fit that mold, actually, I'm a good preacher, but I'm not that dynamic a leader. Actually, David Nicholas told me in the beginning he was worried about me because, he said, you're much more of a professor and you don't seem like you're gonna be a strong enough leader. And on the other hand, I'm a Presbyterian. And actually Presbyterians... Presbyterian churches can be big, but if you ever noticed, there's not lots. Some people said Sinclair Ferguson and Tim Keller are the only Presbyterian celebrities, and it might be true. I mean, right now, if you're gonna call celebrities, and that's usually cuz of books. What made me a quote, unquote, celebrity was my books. Not that I had big church, cuz lots of people had big churches. But there's more accountability in a Presbyterian setting.

So I'll just tell you a quick story, which is true. One presbytery in my denomination heard either rumors or also heard things I'd said online about creation, evolution, Adam and Eve, and stuff like that. In our denomination, I do believe in there was an actual Adam and Eve, especially created by God, from whom we descend. There was either online chatter or things I said that made this presbytery feel like, I don't think he believes in a real Adam and Eve, I think he's a thoroughgoing evolutionist and that wouldn't fit in with our confessional standards. And so five times they wrote my presbytery and asked them to examine me. And the reason my presbytery has to examine me on this, if they didn't then our denomination has a situation in which there's a standard judicial commission, and my presbytery could actually say, Because Tim Keller's presbytery has failed to act, we want you to assume original jurisdiction. See?

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Now this is a very different world than the evangelic world, isn't it? And so I know that every time they wrote, they said, Please examine him by asking him this question. So the presbytery got me together, that means other elders - presbytery is pastors and ruling elders from all the churches in our region - and they examined me and sent back my answers, and it was fine. So they had another question. Five times it happened. And they were trying to get at it. I would say the fourth or fifth time I was starting to say, Come on, but I'm a Presbyterian, and this is... Now, you couldn't do that to Mark Driscoll. You couldn't do that to Bill Hybels.

Mike Cospers: Yeah, there's no structure for it.

Tim Keller: There's no structure for it.

Mike Cospers: Yeah.

Tim Keller: And there really is accountability. So in other words, if I step out or if I'm abusive, and somebody in my church complains, there's a presbytery, that presbytery could exonerate me, but then anybody... Any one person can complain to General Assembly, Standing Judicial Commission, and they would look at it. It's not perfect, not at all. And yet at the same time there was accountability. So the fact I'm Presbyterian, the fact that I just don't like that style at all, which you can probably tell right here, that's why I always... I held my nose and overall, generally speaking, even at Redeemer... Redeemer ended up being a 5,000 or 6,000 person church, and we can talk about that. There are real, real pressures that I do understand on why the big church - regardless, Mike - of whether or not it's Presbyterian or independent or whatever, there are definite pressures that can create these blowups.

Nevertheless, I felt like I was - partly cuz my personality, partly cuz of - personality means temperament. Not my virtue. This is not sanctification. This is just your temperament. My temperament didn't make me as prone to it. And so I rolled my eyes at it, I didn't like it. I thought it was bad news and I thought, frankly, it was gonna bear bad fruit. And so I sit around in my heart, very sadly saying, I told you so. But no schadenfreude because the devastation is just awful.

Mike Cosper: So that brings another question for me, because another thing that happens there in the late 90s, and I believe City to City was connected to this, or maybe it even kind of came out of this. You had organizations like Leadership Network looking at evangelism and church growth and the different phenomenon that were impacting all of this, and so there was this shift that said, Hey, the denominational sort of church planting efforts don't seem as effective as the affinity based partnerships. That a Methodist church and a Baptist church that are trying to reach the same town might have more in common than two Baptist churches or whatever. And so they've facilitated the formation of a lot of different networks that were more loose, that weren't denominations, that didn't have these accountability structures. I'm curious, was that a mistake? Is that something that - has that burned itself out? It seems like that's pretty strong still that you have, whether it's ARC or Acts 29 or City to City, a lot of church planning seems to continue to run through that network-based, loose accountability, high affinity kind of structure.

Tim Keller: Yeah. No, I would.. My answer there is mixed here. What I mean by that is, I do think that on the one hand, City to City, for example - you're right, City to City comes out of this. City to City would prefer, greatly prefer, that the local church that we're trying to help get started is part of a denomination, that they're in some kind of, not just a loose network where there's no accountability, but a real ecclesial connection of some kind. That's what we would prefer.

And yet - so here's the other side. And yet you might say the denomination exclusive approach to church planting, where the denomination does absolutely everything, I don't think is as helpful. It's way better, for example, to take the Methodist and the Presbyterian and the charismatic. Here's 10 people, they're all planting churches in the city. Bring them together, train them together, let them know each other, let them knock their rough edges off of each other. Let them see how each person's denomination actually has got strengths and weaknesses, frankly, inevitably. You cannot do without denominations, I don't believe. I'll just call them ecclesial connections, communions, real commu-

nions, not just loose networks. You really can't do without them. Yet every one of them have limitations. Every one of them has strengths and weaknesses. And so you just... And there's no way to avoid it by saying, I'm just like... We're gonna be non-denominational, then you have your own problems.

So what we would like to see is way more collaboration, way more networking to get your church planting done. That's really, really important in a city. And to work with others to reach the whole city, but you yourself have that ecclesial connection.

There's a certain sense in which denominations give you your white corpuscles. You know what white corpuscles are? They fight infections. But you almost need it to be interdenominational, in order to get your red corpuscles. Denominations are best at accountability and keeping down heresy and infection, but they tend to be, frankly, myopic. In other words, let me be...way of simplifying. So Presbyterians have got doctrine and they've got deep exegesis, and the Baptists have got outreach and activation, evangelism, and the Charismatics, maybe the Anglicans, have got worship... They've all got their own vitamin that is their specialty, and that the other denominations actually just will never do as well. We're all in catch-up. And yet, unless you're really knowing one another really well, you're not gonna be able to, you might say, learn from the other denominations and traditions so that you can create an oxygen-rich version of your own denomination.

So that's the reason why I said, my response to you is mixed. And the reason for the networking thing is the freedom and the cross pollination and how innovative it is, and the denominations tend to be very plodding. And I agree with that. But then to say that you shouldn't be part of a denomination, doesn't work.

Now, the only problem with that is there can be a clash. Very often the denomination wants more control. I'll just give you a real quick one, is in New York City right now, I think if you're gonna do an evangelistically based church plant, you need to give people a good two years almost before they can get a worship service up. You need to start with a church planter and maybe a few other lay people, and you just evangelize your eyes out for 18 months, until you develop 50, 60, 70 people who are seekers or people have become converted and they're bringing people. It takes a couple years, and then when you launch a service, you are really reaching new people.

Now, the fast way to get a church up is to launch big with great music and everything, and the reason why you go big real fast is you actually just draw people from all the other churches. You're basically... Kathy, my wife, calls it the circulation of the saints. All you're doing is just drawing people from elsewhere.

Now, here's the problem. In New York City, we work with all these people from these different denominations, helping them start their churches, but they're getting institutional pressures from their own denominations to go big fast, and to get off the dole, and to not need... we don't... you don't need financial help anymore because you already have 150 people and you're self-supporting.

That's what they want. And yet the church planters on the ground realize through their

network - they're working with all these other church planters from all these other denominations, and they're working with experts and City to City people who have planted many churches here - and they're realizing what my denomination wants and what I really need to be doing are not same. And then that's the problem. And yet we would never say, Oh, just drop... See, this is what Mark Driscoll would do. You quit that denomination, you fire your elders, you do whatever it takes to grow. And that's...No, sorry. In the end you'll blow up.

Mike Cosper: So related to that, then, Redeemer did grow, Redeemer did blow up, and you planted and pastored, a really big, really big church, a church of...

Tim Keller: It did happen.

Mike Cosper: ...significant amount of influence. And even before you published your first book, I was part of a church plant and a church planting church, and I remember the Redeemer... The spiral bound Redeemer Church Planting Manual being handed around like it was this secret stash of insights from Gandalf in New York City, who'd figured it all out. And so you had a reputation before the books came out and before some broader stuff happened, as having unlocked a few things. I'm curious, given that you've got some antipathy towards that culture of leadership and growth and all of that, how do you think about Redeemer's growth, how it happened?

Tim Keller: Now, wait a minute. Okay. I do remember this, that when people started showing up, because Redeemer had grown, they were saying, We've tried the Willow Creek model, we want to try the Redeemer model. And I said, We are not a model. See? So for example, I did know the Willow Creek Model. So they were saying, So I see that you do traditional music in the morning and you do jazz at night, and you do jazz, not contemporary Christian music, but jazz, so that's the model. I said, No, it's not, my gosh. Nashville, I'm not sure jazz is gonna work in Nashville, what are you talking about? And we said, What is the model. And so we ended up coming up with something we called DNA, which was a set of emphases, but not programs. And we tried to say, it has a lot to do with a number of things.

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One is one of the reasons, Mike, for example, one of the reasons - and when I started, this was kind of radical, late eighties, early 90s, I wore a suit every Sunday and we sang traditional hymns every Sunday. And we saw a lot of people become Christians, a lot of people. In fact, it was really remarkable. It was a couple years there, but I call it revival. And when people showed up to try to say, Okay... I remember one person actually said, Where are the dancing bears, how do you get people here? And I said, The reason why I've deliberately not done - in the morning anyway, we started having the evening service and we used more contemporary music. The reason why I deliberately did hymns and suit and all that is, I said, the key is if you show people that the gospel is intellectually respectable, that it actually exposes the real deep needs of their hearts, it offers something that they've been looking for all their lives, and then it's also believable. I'm taking this from Blaise Pascal's famous *Pensées* 187, where he says, Show them that Christianity's respectable, then that it's desirable, so that they wish it was true, then show them that it is true. In other words, respectable, desirable, believable. If you do that in terms they can understand, it doesn't matter how you dress, and it doesn't matter what the

music is. They will get converted, and then they'll bring their friends.

And I said, one of the reasons why, you know, and I've never been a cool looking person anyway... One of the reasons why I got up there looking a little bit like a combination of college professor, that sort of thing, and therefore there was no model. It was, how do you get the gospel into people's lives? How do you bring it into connection with their hearts in such a way they say...First Corinthians 14, The secrets of their hearts will be revealed and they'll fall down and they'll say, God is here.

And you basically had to know your audience, you had to know where they were struggling, you had to know where their prejudices were. And then the here's the second thing. So first of all, you had to have that incredible message. The second thing is you had to create a L'Abri kind of community in which non-believers felt like they were ratified participants.

Mike Cospers: What do you mean by that?

Tim Keller: That means that they felt authorized to be there. They felt that they were not trespassers, they felt welcomed, they felt that they were expected, and they were not under pressure to immediately bow the knee. And that's how L'Abri was. L'Abri was in its earliest days a genuinely, real Christian community where you had preaching and worship and prayer, but it was also a place where non-Christians were expected and people were very, very patient with them and didn't condemn them and didn't make jokes about them or insist that they immediately tow the line. And then the preaching basically has to do what I would call capital conversion. And what that means is that people need to say you understand my world...

See, I come in as an evangelical born again preacher, which means I got no cultural capital. I'm not... In other words, liberal churches have big, beautiful buildings and they say all the right things because their political views are the same. So here comes the evangelical church with all these wrong beliefs. But what I can do is I can get cultural capital. If, first of all, I show that I've read the stuff that they've read better than they have, and if I show that actually I know what they're going through, and I can articulate their objections better than they can articulate them, and I can also articulate where their heart is, then what that does is it means suddenly I get the cultural capital.

So basically... When I did that to people, they were looking for a program. When they said, Where's the Redeemer model, I said, We are big on the arts, there's no doubt about it. And Mike, you know that. But it's New York. That was easy. Everybody... I had 400... At one point, by the way, Mike, you might know, Tom Jennings told me, he goes, You have 400 full-time professional musicians going to Redeemer.

Mike Cospers: Pretty rare.

Tim Keller: Yeah. Yeah, we had great music. Yeah, we had great art and all that stuff. But that was just being true to our community. If you want to call it contextualization, just being New Yorkers. Which I guess you might say was a third thing, that Don Carson would say we were not unnecessarily culturally alien. We were just trying to be like the

rest of the New Yorkers in the sense of the fact that we cared about artistic excellence. In other words, you couldn't come and do something musically unless you were really good. I don't care how much you love Jesus, you really have to be good. In that sense were we kind of New Yorkers, yeah. Yeah, we were. But not in any unusual way.

So there was the contextual, there was the ratified participant, the idea of an open community where people felt they could be. And then there was, frankly, that cultural capital conversion that happened through the way in which we brought the Christian message home to people. And the people who showed up and asked what's secret sauce, and they were looking for something like the Willow Creek thing, they were pretty frustrated.

Mike Cosper: How would you say - because it was successful and there was growth - how would you say it was different from the models that are highly programmatic, growth on steroids? Could you boil down a little bit, like, what the contrast would be from this sort of highly message-specific or communication-specific, context-specific versus the amped-up, highly celebrative, highly programmatic platform driven.

Tim Keller: Okay. Let me give you one real big difference between Redeemer and the other churches you're talking about. And here's where I really, I don't wanna say I sympathize with Mark, but when I listened to your podcast, it made perfect sense. In the early days of a new church, decisions are made very quickly because the only person empowered to make the decision is basically you, if you're the church planter. And then a very small number of people, all of whom have been attracted to the church because of you. What happens when you're starting a church is there's a self-selection process, that isn't true for anybody else who comes later on. If the church continues and there's a second pastor and a third pastor, they never have what the first pastor had. What the first pastor has is people basically select themselves out if they don't like the pastor. If they don't like the preacher, they don't like the leader, they just go somewhere else. So the only people who are there are people who just think, you know, they kind of worship the ground you walk on.

So for at least a year or two, you just make decisions like this and you can respond. And a lot of the growth comes from the fact that you can very quickly make a decision and say, There's a wave here, let's catch that, I can hire that staff person just exactly at the right time. Now what happens is as the church grows, you have more and more empowered people - people who have given their money, people who have spent their time - and they now feel like, I have a right to say. And that's exactly what happens when that starts to slow the growth down. You have more empowered people, and decisions take longer, and you have more people who are able to push back, and you have to do more negotiating, and it does slow the growth down. And it also makes the whole thing feel more like an institution instead of a platform for a particular personality.

And at a certain point, you have to decide - I had to decide... It was very difficult for me because I was about, I'd say about five years in, I realized either I'm gonna have to - I need fewer elders, or I need to get rid of a couple of these elders, or I have to streamline things. Now on the one hand, I'm a Presbyterian and actually there's a limit to what I can do, there's a lot of rules that I can't change. And secondly, I've told you that the two things that happen is my personality is such that I tend to be a peacemaker. That does

make me, by the way, overly sensitive to criticism. It's a flaw. But partly because I want people to be happy, and therefore if they'd criticize me I feel people aren't happy. I'm not thick-skinned. I've learned through, with God's help, to handle it over the years.

Mike Cosper: Yeah, I was gonna say, that's surprising to me just knowing you mostly from your public persona that you would say that you're not thick-skinned. Because you wade into a lot of stuff and...

Tim Keller: oh yeah, yeah. Well, you know what...

Mike Cosper: Because you've said it before, like in New York you're a fundamentalist, and everywhere else you're a liberal.

Tim Keller: Oh, I'm terribly... Yeah, I get lots, unbelievable amount of criticism. But I've gotten better. But you know what? Here's what my wife would know, it's sanctification. It's not did Tim just learn how to... But it was hard fought, Mike. See, there's a couple. One is some people, they don't care, because I know I'm right. Donald Trump, I don't care, Mike. Sorry. That's it. On the other hand, there's that kind of personality. And then there's the other kind of personality where you actually harden yourself. And the way to do that is to look down at people. It's not so much that you're confident, it's like you start saying, Who cares what this rabble thinks. And one of the ways that you deal with the hurt of the criticism is you say, consider the source, they're stupid, they're idiots, forget them.

And either of those, by the way - either I am so sure I'm right that I don't care what people say, or I am so sure everybody else is stupid - those are non-Christian ways to get yourself not feeling that criticism. And so partly because I tried the sanctification way, which means I always struggled, I really wanted people to feel like, This is my church. So I couldn't just run people off. I just couldn't do that, I don't want to do that. And it was also wrong biblically, it was impossible Presbyterian-ishly, and it was also not something that I like doing anyway. And so what happened was Redeemer did slow. We became more bureaucratic, we became more institutional. Sometimes that frustrated me, sometimes it frustrated other people. It's the thing that Mark wouldn't allow to happen. But you see what happened was we stayed an institution, so we have lasted, and Redeemer's continuing on now as a network. It's a long story, I could tell you about that.

But that pressure to say, In order to keep growing, I've got to keep that ability to make snap decisions means I gotta keep all the power. I cannot share power. And that is a fatal mistake. I look back on it. I lost a lot of power to let the church grow, and I also allowed more people to have power. So to make a decision I had more people that had a way in. And I look back on it, I don't think it was wrong.

Mike Cosper: Yeah. That does seem to be, not just with Mark, that just seems to be the pivot point with so many leaders throughout this moment, can you make that pivot to a kind of different phase of ministry, different phase of leadership. I think about all of it, there's a great episode of The West Wing that's literally about this whole thing. This election campaign is over and one of the characters who, like, ran the campaign and ran himself ragged, a hundred hours a week or whatever, screaming at everybody to make the thing happen, they've won and they're in transition, and he hasn't transitioned the

way he's leading and operating and everything, and he just wreaks havoc. And it's at one point, he gets pulled aside and this guy says, Look you have to make this transition. We're not campaigning anymore, we're governing. And it just struck me the parallel, like once the church is established and there's a certain kind of critical mass, the entrepreneurial energy that it does take to get the thing off the ground has to pivot because it can't... It's like the larger mass can't contain it in a stable way anymore.

Tim Keller: I would say this, there's institutionalism where an institution becomes so ingrown and filled with turf-conscious people, and it really loses.... Institutions have a job, and so the job might be... For example, let's say a school, the job is to educate kids, but the institution also has teachers and administrators, and when the institution starts to exist for itself instead of for the kids, you're into institutionalism, when it loses its vision. On the other hand, if you don't have an institution, it doesn't last. If it's just always growing because somebody doesn't allow traditions. Institutions have to have traditions, and a certain number of empowered players, and there's ways in which things are done. So what you want is an institution that keeps some movement dynamics. Pure movement actually burns itself out. An overly institutional institution, I guess you could call it, loses its reason for existence. It becomes just there just to propagate itself. It basically just tries to give the benefits for the internal people. And we all know that that can happen. So what you want for a church to be is that balance between institution and a movement. And that's what I would, rather than trying to keep it the movement, I tried to find that balance and I'm not sure how well I did, but that was the answer.

Mike Cospers: We'll be right back.

Mike Cospers: So you meet Mark in the late nineties, a couple years of overlap there. Fast forward five, six years, and you launched the Gospel Coalition.

Tim Keller: Right, and he's back.

Mike Cospers: And he's back. That, and I think probably more than anywhere else, that's where people talk about you platformed Mark, and people, all the way through the production of this podcast, there were several names that people kept pinging me with, like what does Tim Keller think about platforming Mark Driscoll? What does so and so, a number of others. How do you reflect on that, and how did Mark become a part of that?

Tim Keller: I'm not sure who invited him. Remember this, in the very beginning of an organization, there isn't anybody who actually are the gatekeepers. When you're getting into a room, you invite people, Don Carson invited people, and some of those people invited people. That's all I remember. And you get in the room and you talk about the vision for an organization and you look at each other and then decide, do I want to be in this group. In a certain sense, everybody's a gatekeeper. So it's not like Don and Tim decided who to be in the Gospel Coalition. We were the founders in the sense of we were the drivers and we pushed the thing, but basically we invited people who invited people. We were looking for people with basic affinity, we were looking for people who were broadly reformed, who were in... Don had his list, I had my list. Don had expository preaching, high view of the word and all that. I had my list about trying to engage the culture. So we tried. And I don't remember who invited Mark, but it wouldn't surprise me

because he was a big noise and seemed to be doing well out there.

And so when we formed, we all looked at each other and didn't know each other extremely well. I probably knew a little bit more about Mark and the brashness, because I was there when - it's in your podcast - when Mark was making claims that were probably just not true about reading a book a day, and there was just that - brashness is probably the word. But I wasn't sure when he joined that that was a sign of some kind of major character flaw or anything like that. So we didn't know. And so we all joined up. So first of all, keep that in mind, that is that I didn't make the decision to have him on, but rather we all made a decision to start the thing together, number one.

Number two about Mark is that Mark had the platform. We had no platform. And so did John Piper. In other words, in that entire group, the only people that had a platform... The idea, it's anachronistic thinking... Excuse me, I'm sorry. Interrupting myself. It's anachronistic thinking that Gospel Coalition had a platform, had this big website and all this stuff, and we invited people like Mark Driscoll onto it. No, Mark had a website, Mark had an enormous platform, and so did John Piper. And the Gospel Coalition had nothing. We had nothing. In fact, Don and I were... Oh, Mike, we are so foresighted. Our understanding of the Gospel Coalition was it was gonna be an annual pastor's conference. Our original thought was more like T4G.

That's what we really thought we were gonna do. We were just going to have a pastor's conference. Frankly, I'll just say, I remember Don saying to me, a little broader than T4G. A little bit, a little broader. And he also said less celebrity focused. We knew T4G was starting at the same time, and we invited them all. They were all part of Gospel Coalition. And we felt like T4G was a little more celebrity-oriented, let's bring in the big names with the big books and all that, and it was a little more combative sounding, just a wee bit. A little more saber-rattling, just a bit. It was small. We love these guys, they're very dear friends. But Don was saying, We're not the same, we're gonna be doing a lot more than just having a... But nevertheless, originally we thought we were going to be a pastor's conference. Then we said maybe we need to have a website. So we weren't really thinking this out very well.

Frankly, I would say when we started the website, it was John Piper, particularly Justin Taylor, coming over from Desiring God, and it was Mark Driscoll's connection that created the Gospel Coalition platform. So maybe that's even more evil. It could be that in people's minds, it would be very evil that Gospel Coalition actually platformed Mark Driscoll, which people say all the time Tim Keller platformed. The reality is that Mark Driscoll platformed us, and John Piper platformed us, and created the platform, which we didn't have. And maybe that's more evil, but that's the truth. And then as time went on, and one of the big - here's the third thing with the Gospel Coalition. It's not a denomination. So when bad behavior, and not just Mark Driscoll, but also James McDonald, and also CJ, and people like that, when bad behavior and bad reports began to come out about members of the council, frankly we hadn't thought out, what do you do about that. We had bylaws, we had nothing about anything like that. And we were also trying to figure out, what the heck are we.

The idea that Tim and Don ran the thing, we really didn't. Nobody really ran the thing.

It was really a fellowship. So I think we've been bloodied rightly. In other words, people who wanna say, You've brought all these folks together and then you didn't really have a good way of exercising any kind of... Well, what do you say? You can't say discipline, because we're not a church, but some kind of oversight. And I do think that's right. No, I'm sorry, I reject the idea that we platformed Mark Driscoll. Mark Driscoll platformed us. But once the bad behavior showed up, I do think the Gospel Coalition wasn't really able to know what to do because nobody felt that I had the job to pull the plug or even get a process started.

So fortunately they voluntarily left, because they realized that they were not... People like James McDonald and Mark, they left because they could tell that we were very unhappy, that most of us were very unhappy with them. But there should have probably been something more formal than that.

Mike Cospers: Yeah, I think what's interesting is it does come back to this kind of denominations versus networks thing.

Tim Keller: Yeah, it does.

Mike Cospers: Because there's the perception of much more sort of institutional strength and architecture than was really there. There was nothing, it sounds like there were no mechanisms at all.

Tim Keller: Exactly. You know, I think that's fair. Okay. You know what, touché. Touché. I think that's right. I do think Gospel Coalition participates in... By the way, I'm very happy about the Gospel Coalition overall. I think it's done a lot of great work, so I'm not... But I do think that there is a... It participates in the weakness of the evangelical parachurch empire. And it's been a problem ever since George Whitefield. The parachurch empire. And by the way, in my denomination there was plenty of people that just feel like Tim - I won't mention anybody's name - but I've got some really good friends that are just saying, Why in the world did you ever get involved with the Gospel Coalition, because it's just kind of a evangelical parachurch network that doesn't have any accountability and the problems you've had are because it's not a real... it's not ecclesial. It's a voluntary association. But when you push those folks, are you against every voluntary association? You're not against that. But it does participate in the problem. You're right. Yeah.

Mike Cospers: I just think it's an interesting... It's a reflection of the reality of the way, I don't know, for lack of a better term, Christendom thinks about churches, leaders, those associations. There's an assumption of a kind of accountability and knowledge and all that's just not there.

Tim Keller: That's not there.

Mike Cospers: Yeah.

Tim Keller: Right. And now we see it.

Mike Cospers: Yeah.

Tim Keller: That's one of the reason for the blowups, yes. But it's the evangelical world, not the main line world, that has always seen the main carriers of ministry would be these parachurch organizations, the evangelical empire. And I do think that there's great weakness. It's a fruit of revivalism. Just a great book to read, Mike, if you haven't read it before. It's not a page turner because it's academic, but Nate Hatch's book, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, the democratization. The revivalism was really anti-ecclesial. It put all the emphasis on the individual and the dynamic individual, and the individual who's got a charisma, and that they just band together and they just do it. And that way they do end runs around the accountability structures of congregations and denominations. And guess what, upside and downside. In fact, I'd just say originally, even Baptist eventually became a domination, but originally - I'll just show you the upside and downside. If you were in Kentucky and you were on the frontier and you became a Christian, and now I want to be a minister, the Presbyterians, Episcopalians, the Congregationalists would send you back to the east coast for seven years of liberal arts education, and the Baptists would just lay hands on you and say, You're a minister. Now, what's the advantages and disadvantages? The Baptists grew like crazy because they were of the people. But they didn't have the theological training, it was incredible thinness. And a lot of evangelical anti-intellectualism comes from that move. The reason why evangelicals are large, the reason why they're so powerful in a certain sense, and why they're so individualistic, anti-intellectual, anti-elitist, anti accountability is because of that move. And it's basically the fruit of revivalism.

Mike Cosper: Okay, so that's really interesting. I had not thought in those terms. What I had thought in terms of, and I know this is something that you've talked about ad nauseam probably, is the ways that secularism has shaped the church in ways that incline it towards cult of personality as well. Because we do have this milieu that we come up in where spirituality is just difficult, it's difficult on the structures of the imagination. And so when these characters come along that have the kind of confidence and absolute authority of a guy like Driscoll, who's heard the voice of God and knows how you're supposed to live your life, with that really strong declarative authority, there's something really... I think it's compelling in the same way that a guy like Trump showing up saying, I alone can fix it, has an authority that we crave that's been undermined in other ways in our culture.

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Tim Keller: That is just as important as the evangelical revivalist background. The other thing is you've got basically the modern self, the therapeutic self. The therapeutic self is that your individual needs are preeminent, that nobody can tell you who you are, you have to decide truth for yourself, you have to decide, you have to look inside yourself and come up and become a self-actualized individual, because you are living true to who you know yourself to be, and to what you know the truth to be, because you found it inside. That's all incredibly... Read *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah, expressive individualism.

By the way, gosh, I told you I wasn't going to go on long. There's a chapter in there on Sheilism. *Habits of the Heart*, back in the 1980s, was talking about this rise of expressive individualism of the therapeutic self. They found a woman who they said, What's your religion? And she says, Well, my religion is I listen to a voice in my own heart as to what is right and what is wrong. Her name was Sheila, by the way. And she says, So my religion, I have a name for my religion, it's Sheilism. She said, I worship that little voice in my heart

that tells me what to do, and I live in accordance with that, and so that's my religion. It's Sheilism, there's only one person in my religion, it's just me. And it's a classic, by the way. And I do think it says something.

So when along comes somebody who says, You know, I have looked into my heart and I know the truth, and they seem like the kind of person you want to be yourself. Missy Wallace who works for City to City, she wrote an article for the Gospel Coalition on don't necessarily seek your passion in order to find your work. People say, I need to find... My work needs to be also my passion, whatever my work is, it has to be something I really love doing, something that's my passion. And she says, that would be great, but it's not the main thing. And boy, she says her own children still give her pushback on this. Because she says that is not the way the Bible looks at it. The high you should get from work is that your work contributes to the common good, and it really helps people. That should be a passion. But whether or not the very thing you're doing necessarily is just exciting every day - I just love going to the office, I just love it. If you realize, what I'm doing is actually helping people, what I'm doing is making a living for my family, then does it have to be your passion? She says no. And the idea that it has to be incredible, I have to be so fulfilled in every part of my life, she says, That's not the Bible, that's the modern self.

So you're absolutely right. That contributes very much into what's going on too. And unfortunately, there's a certain kind of figure that makes people feel like there's a self-actualized individual. When actually what they should see, if you're a minister, is just a man or a woman under God.

The other thing that I notice, and nobody talks about it anymore the way they used to, is the mistaking of gifts for grace. And that is that there's a tendency to look at... The spiritual gifts, let's say, are things like your preaching and your teaching and your administration and your leadership, and that's your talents. It's really what you do. But spiritual graces, the fruit of the spirit, is who you are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness. It is absolutely natural, in our culture especially, especially in a therapeutic culture, especially in a consumer culture, especially in a technological culture, to not look at being, but look at doing. And so what's going on in a lot of these megachurches, frankly - in fact, everywhere - is what everybody's concentrating on is really not the character of the leaders, but the talent.

I'll tell you a quick, frightening story. A minister had an affair with a woman in his congregation, and it eventually came out and of course it blew up everything. And I remember at one point I had breakfast with him and we were talking, and for whatever reason he was willing to talk a little bit about how he maintained the ability to lead a big congregation while he was having an affair for a pretty good amount of time. He never told me how long it was, but it wasn't brief. And he said, Here's what happened. On Friday and Saturday as he was working on his sermon, his conscience would just start killing him: How can you get up there and preach when you're doing this? And then on Monday he would say, On Monday, I'm gonna call her and it will be over. And that would give his conscience just enough room so that he could actually write the sermon, and do the sermon without feeling like a hypocrite. And then his gifts would kick in, and even though his heart was far from God and he was feeling guilt and his prayer life was terrible and all that, the situation brought out his gifts. He was a great speaker. And he saw people

crying, and he saw people afterwards saying, I came to faith in Christ. And on Monday he said, God's really still with me. That's mistaking the operation of gifts for the work of spiritual fruit and grace in your life.

And this is happening all over the place. And here's the frightening thing. The people in closest to the person, they see the lack of fruit. The people out here, they can only see the gifts. So they see the lack of fruit, they see the grumpiness or the abusiveness or the anger or the pride or the self-centeredness and all that, and they start to lose their respect for the leader. But as soon as they start to criticize - the people out here who don't see that, they only see the gifts - they just attack anybody who criticizes. You saw that. And it's all because the gifts of grace thing, the people in close see the lack of grace, the people out here can only see the gifts. And unfortunately, very often the people up here who are trying to keep the operation going, they see the lack of grace, but they also know that they can't financially afford anything other than just keeping this person in power. So as I was listening to your stuff on Mars Hill, that was the other thing I wanted to say besides... I've mentioned a number of things here, but I thought that's something I needed to add.

I hope you find that helpful.

Mike Cospers: No, it is really helpful. I know one of the things I think a number of folks would love to hear you speak to, if there's anything to add to it, is how do you account for your own longevity and ministry. You've had a long run, you've done well, and I think a number of people look to you as somebody who's endured well and navigated a lot of this stuff. When you speak to younger pastors and leaders, what are the things you would point to and say, This is what's gonna keep you from going to the zoo?

Tim Keller: I think earlier on one of the things that helps you continue to grow in grace and not get, frankly, not get an inflated ego, not get blind spots, I think earlier on Hebrews 3:13 fellowship. And forgive me, I'm so old that I'm going to quote this in the King James, which is, "Exhort one another daily, lest you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin." Which is a place where it says you've got to have some people in your life who exhort you daily because sin will always blind you, the deceitfulness of sin always blinds you. So who is it in your life that actually is authorized to come talk to you, look at you, really rake you over the coals if necessary? I think in the earlier days of my ministry, that was extraordinarily important. It's awfully helpful if one of those people, you happen to be married to, because they can see things that nobody else can see. But I had some others.

As time went on, though, here's what has to happen. You can hide even from people like that. I realized that midway. You can still do bad things. You can still have an affair, you can still do things, still getting hooked on pornography. You can hide. And also, here's another problem, is that it's very difficult to make friends like that if you lose them, if somebody dies or somebody moves away or that kind of thing, it's very difficult in your fifties and sixties, and forties, fifties, sixties, to go out and get another person like that. And therefore... Oh, the prayer life. I'm sorry. And not just praying about things. Communion with God. Read John Owen's little book, start with abridged edition. John Owen's little book Communion with God, the Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Leave out the stuff on the Song of Solomon, when he goes off for pages and pages expounding the Song of

Solomon on life and just describes Jesus. Apart from that, that book is unbelievable. I just reread it recently. And it talks about the purpose of prayer is to actually have the love of God shed abroad on your heart. To actually have it, to actually see His face, to actually sense the grace of God.

What he says is you have communion with the Father in His love, with the Son in His grace, and with the Holy Spirit in His comfort. And there actually has to be a genuine experiential life. Not just say your prayers, not just read your Bible. And you have to be able to also take... You need to be finding your deepest besetting sins. It's called mortification. That mortification, that's an old Puritan word. That does not mean repenting for something you've already done. No, no, no. Mortification is identifying your besetting sins, and you're going to try to weaken them before they lead to actual behavior. And over the years, only with lots and lots of communion with God do you identify your three or four or five most besetting sins, and find ways to apply - what Owen would say - you have to apply Jesus to them. You have to say, In what way does Jesus actually, looking at who Jesus is and what He's done, how does that weaken this inordinate desire in my heart, how does this reorder the loves of my heart. You have got to have a vibrant prayer life. And if you are too busy for that, and I have to say, the more successful your church is, the more likely you're going to feel too busy for it, and that's deadly, that's the other thing.

Mike Cosper: Chuck DeGroat and I were talking about this a couple weeks ago. We're so attuned to having a strategy, a technique for everything, but when it comes to this stuff, the boring but true answer is, man, if you want to guard your heart from this stuff, live the Christian life.

Tim Keller: Yeah.

Mike Cosper: Pray and seek the Lord's face and be humble and confess your sins, and be killing sin or it'll be killing you, and all that stuff.

Tim Keller: Yeah. I don't know if I would even... I'll just tell you this. The only real accountability that just cannot be avoided is when you've experienced God's presence and His love, and it is so delicious that you say, I just don't... It doesn't happen every day, nothing like that. But the idea is that I do not want to lose that, I can't lose that. That's the only accountability I know. Even accountability with my wife - I could lie. There is no other accountability. And even just a prayer life in which you pray. I read my Bible and pray every day. The real question is, Are you having fellowship with God or communion with God, and do you sometimes commune with God in His love with Christ and His grace and the Holy Spirit and His comfort. Do you, and if you do, that's the thing you say, I cannot live without that.

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