

Together for the City

**NEIL POWELL
and JOHN JAMES**



**Foreword by
TIMOTHY J. KELLER**

**How Collaborative
Church Planting
Leads to Citywide
Movements**


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email@ivpress.com

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For Jane and Sarah
and our fellow church planters who
make up 2020birmingham

Without you this story could not be told

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FOREWORD

A Bigger Vision

Timothy J. Keller

The book before you is an exciting project. I've known one of its authors, Neil Powell, for a number of years, and I regard him as one of the most important leaders of the evangelical church in Britain. Neil was one of the first there to answer the call that Redeemer City to City has been issuing for citywide church-planting movements. I had made the case for it in *Center Church*, my book describing 2020birmingham, the remarkable church network that Neil has seen grow in an urban center in England. 2020birmingham is an embodiment of Redeemer City to City's theory and vision and is one of the most successful ministry projects in all of Europe.

Here Neil and John James, his fellow member of 2020birmingham and partner in writing this book, present an instructive and inspiring case study of ministry in the UK's second city. They build on that history to offer both a vision and practical resources so gospel-believing churches in any city can mount the same kind of movement.

First, the authors show how the vision for collaborative church planting comes from "a great need for the gospel." Most see the world

as divided between good people and bad people. The good (the moral or the liberal or the conservative—or just the people like “us”) are making the world a better place, while those “others” are ruining things. So we think we need to liberate the good folks and marginalize the bad ones. The gospel, by contrast, provides both a far more dire and a far more hopeful assessment of the world’s situation. Everyone, nice and nasty, is spiritually blind and eternally lost. All our problems stem from sin and the resulting breakdown of all relationships. In your city, the respectable are as lost and as affected by sin as the criminals and prostitutes on the streets. And yet the Bible promises that God’s kingdom and gospel will triumph in the end. So the need for the gospel is massive, and the gospel’s prospects are even greater.

This means that Christian leaders can’t be satisfied with the status quo. Ministers are often called “stewards” in the Bible (1 Corinthians 4:1-2; 1 Peter 4:10 ESV), and the master of the house in the parable of the talents assumed that his stewards would not merely keep his assets safe but also invest in order to increase them (Matthew 25:14-30). The point isn’t about money, but that we have the mysteries of God: the gospel (1 Corinthians 4:1-2; Colossians 1:26-27). And we know what God wants us to do with the gospel. He sends us out in an ever-expanding mission to disciple the nations (Acts 1:8; 8:4; 8:26-40; 10; Matthew 28:18-20). So no church should exist just to keep its doors open and maintain things. The master condemned the laziness of the steward who only conserved his assets (Matthew 25:26).

This parable can’t be turned into a wooden insistence that every congregation keep growing in numbers. Sometimes faithful preaching shrinks the numbers of an unhealthy church, and there are plenty of other good reasons why an individual congregation may remain at its size. The parable means that the church leaders of a whole city or region can’t rest content. They must strive to further the mission of

Jesus with the resources they've been given. They must cast vision for reaching the city together.

It's natural for a human organization to begin as a movement (coming into existence to further a cause outside itself), but most eventually become tribes (existing mainly to serve themselves and the interests of their members). Biblical steward-leadership offers a built-in resistance to this natural trend. The steward must not let the household operate and exist for the interests of those in power within it. The steward's job is to work for the interests of the Master. God punishes stewards who use his assets for their own comfort (see, for example, Luke 12:45-47). The Lord gives us his Word and Spirit and expects us to multiply his resources for his glory.

Even if a set of churches holds basic theological truths and doctrines of the biblical gospel in common, it's very challenging to cooperate across the barriers of denomination and tradition. All should agree that Jesus called the church to be one for the purpose of a unified witness before the world (John 17:20-21). So as long as this doesn't entail doctrinal compromise, it's a worthy goal. Nevertheless, very few leaders are confident that these barriers can be overcome. Many question the possibility and therefore the wisdom of even trying.

In *Together for the City*, the authors show that the resources for practical collaboration in cities lie in the gospel itself, particularly in the generosity and humility that a true grasp of the gospel always produces.

When the disciples saw someone who wasn't a member of their band ministering "in Jesus' name," they tried to stop him "because he was not one of us" (Mark 9:38). Jesus was far more generous in replying, "Whoever is not against us is for us" (9:40). At that point, the disciples didn't understand the gospel. When Peter fell back into eating only with Jewish Christians and not with Gentile Christians, Paul told him he was forgetting the gospel of justification by grace

alone through faith alone (Galatians 2:14). How, Paul argued, can you think you're better than anyone else when you know you're equally sinful and lost before God, yet saved by sheer grace and justified by Christ's work, not your own?

If we only give lip service to the gospel, not grasping it and rejoicing in it, a proud and ungenerous spirit will stymie any collaboration with others who also minister in Christ's name. When we look for justification—even unconsciously—in our doctrinal distinctives, we will not be humble; we will look down on those who do not share our tradition. If we subtly look for justification in our ministry successes, we won't be generous. It will become impossible to share power and to sacrifice time and money that could be used to build our own ministry's size and status. But the gospel gives us both the vision and the resources to work together to reach our cities.

For the sake of the world mission of the church, churches and Christian leaders must unite within their cities across tribal barriers in order to increase the number of disciples and churches. While there is an increasing body of literature about church planting in general, there is almost nothing available that describes whole-city collaboration among multiple denominations, networks, and movements. Neil and John spell out what it takes to get this done. I know of no better book on the subject.