In Dedication

To a very special group of friends who have demonstrated that the gospel grows at the speed of friendship

Raymond and Marydel
Bob and Leslie
D. G. and Gini
Ray and Denise
Mario and Lynelle
Katherine and Alan
Zach and Regan
Scott and Holly
Craig and Laura
Dave and Carol
David
Paul
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FOREWORD

THE GOSPEL IS DISRUPTING CITIES

The book you are about to read is one more volume about the gospel. You may say, “I know the gospel,” but since the gospel is endlessly rich and infinitely multifaceted, there is always something new to learn about its power and effect (1 Pet. 1:12).

In these pages Mac shows how the gospel has the power to disrupt the status quo, which is always indifferent to evil. The gospel disrupted the life of a complacent teenager in South Dakota. It disrupted a cold, hard resistance to the historic gospel in the boroughs of New York City and the center of Manhattan. It disrupted the high walls between denominations and the even higher walls between the races and classes to form an unprecedented unity and movement to reach the metro region of New York. And it has begun to make use of the new and close connections between the great global cities of the world to spread many of these same influences and effects to other urban centers. This is the story of all that, and—if you are a Christian minister or lay leader—you could hardly find a more encouraging book to read today.
I can imagine skepticism regarding the claims about what God is doing and will do in cities. Don’t all the headlines tell us that Christianity, and even belief in God in general, is in retreat, especially among the young millennial generation and in the centers of Western secular culture—the great cities? Aren’t the cities of Europe, for example, filled with empty church buildings that are being turned into nightclubs, restaurants, and condos? Isn’t religion in a downward arc of inevitable decline?

No. Last year those of us who were at a European church planters’ conference in Paris were addressed by Grace Davie, emeritus professor of sociology at the University of Exeter in Great Britain. She pointed out that, yes, nominal or inherited Christianity is declining. By this she meant religion people are born into, so that one might say, for example, “I’m Norwegian, so I’m Lutheran” or “I’m French, so I’m Catholic.” We live in modern societies where we are taught the importance of our own free choices. Inherited religion no longer maintains its hold on most people. This is why, overall, fewer people who are born into a church-connected family end up attending and belonging to those congregations.

However, she noted (against all expectations) that new movements of Christian faith are growing in Western cities. One reason for this is the influx of Christians from the global south. In China, Africa, and many other places in the world, Christianity is growing rapidly as those societies are modernizing. Then, as people come to Europe and the United States from Africa, Latin America, and Asia, they plant new churches or strengthen other ones that are growing and reaching those cities. Why? Because, while religion that is inherited will decline in the modern age, religion that is chosen will not. The growing Christian churches are evangelical and Pentecostal, and they emphasize the biblical
call to “choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve” (Josh. 24:15) and the biblical teaching that we stand or fall on our own faith, not the choices of our family or community (Ezek. 18). These churches teach that vicarious, formal religion is not enough. There must be a radical, inward conversion (Deut. 30:6; Jer. 9:25; Rom. 2:29). Christianity that foregrounds these important biblical concepts and lifts up heart-changing personal faith can reach many contemporary people—and it can reach cities.

Davie, a sociologist, observed that much of the new Christian movement and growth is coming into various nations through their greatest cities. New spiritual vitality is coming to Europe and parts of the United States that way, and Christianity is also coming to non-Christian countries through their chief urban areas. While cities, she says, have in the past been seen as the “beacons of a more irreligious future,” now it is in the cities that Christianity is thriving because they are more multiethnic and more globalized, and the new kinds of faith that call modern people to decide and choose are being deployed there. Davie added, as an example, that London now has more growing churches than anywhere else in Great Britain.

This message is both exciting and challenging for Christians in cities today. In Western countries, many of the older churches relying on inherited faith are dying. Gone is that great “canopy” of nominal Christians who were not personally devout but thought religion was good and important and were not very difficult to draw into Christian churches. However, contemporary people have plenty of the same intuitions of God and sin and spiritual longings for love, meaning, and grace that their ancestors did. Some people will hear the same message and say, “You are out of your mind!” (Acts 26:24), while others will be cut to the heart and ask, “What shall we do?” (2:37).
How can believers and church leaders in the cities of the world meet this challenge and seize this opportunity? They can start by grasping and building on the five truths and priorities Mac explains and illustrates throughout this book:

_The Gospel Matters._ There is the power. Know, believe, and lift up the gospel, and everything will change.

_Church Unity Matters._ Denominations and traditions complement and supplement one another. No one church or kind of church alone can reach the city.

_Cities Matter._ The people of the world are moving into cities faster than the church is. No mission is more imperative than multiplying churches and ministry in urban areas.

_Millennial Leadership Matters._ These great challenges will not be met unless the reins of leadership are passed to this generation now.

Finally, _Movement Matters._ What is a movement? It’s actually not easy to define. But if by faithful ministry you release the power of the gospel and bring the churches and generations together in prayer and ingenuity to reach your city—well, you’ll know a movement when you see it.

Tim Keller, January 2016
I want to thank several people who helped make this book possible.

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Thanks to my wife, Marya, who loves me so well and loves our shared calling.

Thanks to the New York City Leadership Center board and staff, who labor so hard on behalf of a shared vision to catalyze leaders to impact their cities.

Thanks to the many friends who allowed me to hear their stories. My prayer is that this book tells those stories well.

Thanks most of all to God, who has disrupted the world with the gospel in the person of Jesus.
As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

—Acts 9:3–4

To meet the Messiah in a yes-or-no encounter forces us to examine and to admit what we hold absolute, which is exactly what happened to the rich young ruler long ago. Jesus had—and still has—a disturbing way of putting everything into a different perspective. In his presence we cannot get by with “almost” or “maybe” or “later.” A confrontation with Jesus is always a rigorous examination for the “musts” of our life.

—Donald J. Shelby, Meeting the Messiah
A Dream and a Ditch

At seventeen I had a demonic encounter in my bedroom. It was 1976.

I was a high school junior living in Avon, South Dakota. My hometown had a population of six hundred people. My family owned the local bank. I was a good student and active in multiple sports and music programs. A bright future waited on the horizon.

I was agnostic in my stance toward Christianity. I had grown up in a local Presbyterian church, which laid an important foundation for my faith. After entering high school, my church attendance became irregular. Church had become a series of uninteresting rituals.

My life began to crumble in my junior year. My closest friends were seniors and leaving soon for college. I was also stumbling unsuccessfully through the uncharted world of high school dating. I anticipated the prospect of becoming friendless and lonely.

That school year other dynamics were at play that led to my conversion. Two friends and their local church began to pray for me. One adult in particular, a woman in the congregation, befriended and prayed for me daily. She prayed that I would encounter Jesus as the Great Reconciler.

And then, the dream. One February evening I was in my basement bedroom studying. Lying on my bed, I fell asleep and began to dream.

In my dream I was wearing the same clothes as when I had been awake. The basement outside my bedroom was completely dark. It was dark in the way that a rural upper-Midwestern community becomes dark in the dead of winter.
I saw a fiery-colored figure walking down the stairs to the basement. It reached the bottom, pivoted left, and walked the length of the basement into my room. It was as real as the computer I am now typing on. The figure extended its hands to grab me.

I awoke, shaken in a way I had never felt before. I was convinced that it had been more than just a dream. From that point on, my life was disrupted. My cynical view of God and doubts about His existence were shattered. The reality of another world had come crashing in on me.

After my demonic encounter, I began to read the New Testament, slowly unveiling the truth about this spiritual, supernatural world. I was experiencing a slow awakening to a God who disrupted the world and made Himself known. The person of Jesus came alive to me in a new way.

In May of that same school year, I asked a young woman to join me for the junior-senior prom. The event occurred on a warm Saturday night. My grandmother loaned me her red Chevrolet, in which I drove my date to the high school gym. As the prom wound down, we agreed to join my classmates at a movie theater twenty miles away in Springfield.

As I drove south on Route 50, my date and I fell asleep. The car began to veer to the right. I awoke to see us hurtling toward a ditch. I jerked the steering wheel so hard that the car tilted up on two wheels, threatening to flip. We jolted to a stop in the opposite ditch facing north.

*God had my full attention.*

It wasn’t my first car-related near-death experience. In 1973, when I was fourteen, I was riding my bicycle and swerved out in front of a car I didn’t know was approaching me from behind. The car struck me at fifty miles per hour, and I flew through the air. The driver said I pushed myself off of the car’s roof. I struck
the asphalt, completely dazed. In that instant I didn’t know if I
was dead or alive. My legs were badly bruised, but nothing was
broken. I spent that summer recovering on crutches.

A year later I attended the funeral of my older sister’s classmate
after she was killed in a car accident on prom night. Another
wake-up call.

After my own accident on prom night, I began to marvel at
how fortunate I was. It was an exclamation point punctuating my
new spiritual awakening. I was sobered, suddenly keenly aware
of the life-and-death drama playing out around us all the time.

That experience led me to accept a weeklong position as a
newspaper editor at a North Dakota Bible camp during that
summer. I thought that a week of spiritual retreat would help
me think through what I believed. During the week I became
intrigued by the topic of baptism. I inquired as to its meaning,
and one of the camp pastors met with me at the back of the
cafeteria. He explained the gospel clearly to me. I was undone.
And on July 20, 1976, I surrendered myself to Jesus.

This was my yes-or-no encounter with Jesus. I knew I had
to be fully devoted to following Him—whatever that meant. It
would require courage at each step—a trusting abandonment
to Jesus and a confidence He modeled when He died knowing
God would raise Him from the dead.

The loneliness, the determination of praying friends, the de-
monic encounter, and the near-death experiences all converged
in that afternoon conversation at the back of the cafeteria. I was
forever changed. My life was disrupted.

Then something interesting happened. I had a revelation
simultaneous with my first conversion. Without any formal
training or teaching, I knew that churches were meant to work
together. The body of Christ was meant to express itself as one.
My small town was home to several diverse churches. Churches in rural South Dakota were often built by various European cultural groups. The Dutch were Reformed; the Germans were Baptists, Lutherans, and Presbyterians; and the Czechs were Catholic.

Within three weeks of my conversion, I brought all of the local youth groups together to ask the question: What could we do together to impact our high school? We decided to sponsor an evening of Christian films. We also started Bible studies on Saturday nights and before school. Before long, 20 percent of the high school was attending the early morning studies. It was a movement of sorts, in miniature.

That became a thread in my life for the next four decades. Wherever I would go—attending the University of South Dakota, working with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship in Sioux Falls and New York City, and then traveling to cities around the globe—helping to unite the body of Christ became my organizing passion.

When the gospel takes ahold of your life, it completely disrupts everything.

**What Is the Gospel?**

The gospel is the power of God to forgive us and the presence of God to form us into the image of His Son, Jesus.

The gospel in its simplest expression is that Jesus came to earth as God Himself to live the life we were meant to live, and He died the death we should have died. In His crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus put death to death.

The scope of the gospel includes—yet goes far beyond—its impact on us personally. The gospel does disrupt our lives—it affects our decisions about where we live, who we marry, and
what kind of work we do. It also disrupts cultures, cities, and civilizations. Jesus is inviting all of us into this yes-or-no encounter.

Jesus came to not only rescue us but also enlist us to become agents in a gospel movement. God has a strategy. The center of His strategy is to change the kingdom of this world into “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah” (Rev. 11:15).

In my personal journey, the gospel has completely disrupted my life and taken me from rural South Dakota to NYC. It has taken me from a culturally divided, monolingual community to a community that speaks one hundred different languages.

The gospel has led me from my Presbyterian roots and brought me into friendship with Pentecostals, Baptists, Lutherans, and everything in between. The gospel has informed how I earn my income, how I raise my children, and how I attempt to help the global poor.

When the gospel disrupts our lives and penetrates our beings, we become concerned with God’s concerns—the spiritual emptiness of a vast world, the economic deprivation of billions of people, the racial divide of our cities. We adopt Jesus’s concern over a divided church. The gospel infuses meaning into everything we do—every relationship, every career decision, and every place we plant ourselves geographically.

As we study, learn, and live the gospel, our lives should become organized around five matters:

The Gospel Matters. The truth of God turns irreligious people into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.¹

Church Unity Matters. Churches uniting across denominational and cultural lines breathe the aroma of belief. Division in the church breeds atheism in the world.

Cities Matter. The story line of the New Testament is about Jesus going to die in Jerusalem, the religious capital of the world,
and Paul going to die in Rome, the political capital of the world. Today cities represent the most rapidly changing demographic in world history, with seven thousand people moving into sizable cities every hour. This represents a new San Francisco or a new Singapore birthed every month.

**Millennial Leadership Matters.** Most spiritual movements are started by leaders under the age of twenty-eight. Attracting millennial leaders to the church and keeping them is crucial to the flourishing of the church.

**Movement Matters.** Given the exploding needs in the world spiritually, economically, and socially, the status quo is unacceptable. Christianity needs to grow rapidly in difficult places all over the world—particularly in cities. The rapid development of efforts to combat the greatest challenges in our world today—from human trafficking to grinding poverty—is also essential.

When we say yes to Jesus, all of these dynamics should matter profoundly to us. Being abandoned to Jesus means we identify with His passions and strategies.

**What Is a Gospel Movement?**

For nearly thirty years I have been influenced and shaped by great modern spiritual fathers, including Tim Keller, Ray Bakke, David Bryant, and Bill Hybels. I have been equally shaped by my pastoral colleagues in NYC from a diverse racial and denominational spectrum.

I have been shaped by the way Pentecostals pray, by the way Baptists share their faith, by the way Presbyterians preach, by the way Lutherans and Episcopalians observe the ancient liturgy, and by the way Catholics speak as a moral voice on the great social issues of our day. I have been shaped by the way Coptic
and Orthodox Christian leaders persevere in the midst of great suffering and persecution.

I believe a gospel movement is taking place when one or more of the following three dynamics is happening:

- Christianity is growing faster than the general population.
- Christianity is achieving measurable progress against the great social and humanitarian problems of a city or community.
- Christians are increasingly finding themselves in places of cultural influence, and Christianity is penetrating the arenas of cultural influence: morals, aesthetics, and knowledge.

Paul: A Gospel Movement Leader

The gospel disrupted the life of Saul (who became Paul) in approximately AD 35. He was a Pharisee and a zealous persecutor of the church. In his ruthlessness, he captured and imprisoned Christians and sentenced them to death. Saul was the most violent religious bigot of the first century.

In Saul’s story in Acts 9, we learn about three critically important dimensions to his conversion—his “three commitments,” we might say—in his yes-or-no encounter with Jesus:  

*He was committed to Jesus.* Jesus confronted Saul on that road to Damascus. It was a profoundly personal encounter. Saul’s vision of Jesus was transformed from that of a heretical leader of a tiny sect to a cosmic view of the Lord of the church.

*He was committed to the priority of the church.* Jesus asked Saul the most important question of the New Testament: “Why do you persecute me?” To persecute the church was to persecute
Jesus. Jesus was indistinguishable from his people. Paul would never forget that moment. He would become the greatest champion for church unity in the history of the church. Later in that chapter, Ananias put his hand on Saul’s shoulder and uttered the two tenderest words of the New Testament: “Brother Saul.” The greatest public enemy of the first-century church had become its newest member.

*He was committed to his future calling.* Ananias was told that Saul would become a witness “to proclaim my name to the Gentiles and their kings” (Acts 9:15). The king of the Gentiles was Caesar. Caesar lived in Rome. Saul had a date with Rome. That date shaped his understanding of where his life would lead. While Jesus died just outside of Jerusalem, the religious capital of the world, Paul died in Rome, the political capital of the world. The New Testament can be properly understood only from these two city-centric perspectives.

Paul’s “three commitments”—to Christ, to the church, and to his city calling—compose core themes in the last twenty chapters of Acts. We are invited to work out these three callings in each of our lives: our commitment to Jesus, to His church, and to our cities is foundational to a disruptive gospel.

**The Gospel Ecosystem**

Throughout his life, Paul carried out a remarkably fruitful mission that had an impact on the known world, particularly in cities. God is doing today what He was doing in the first century.

In his book *Center Church*, Tim Keller has drawn a diagram to help readers understand how the gospel penetrates a city. He illustrates three concentric circles:
1. **Inner Circle: Contextualized Theological Vision.** The gospel has to make sense in the unique place where it is preached. Paul was masterful in this. He was able to give evidence to God’s existence in his preaching about creation in the city square in gentile cities.

2. **Middle Circle: Church Planting and Church Renewal Movements.** New churches are eight times more effective in reaching new people than churches ten years and older. Cities need all kinds of new churches to reach all kinds of diverse people groups.

3. **Outer Circle: Specialized Ministries.** Every city has diverse expressions of the gospel—campus ministries, justice efforts, prayer movements, marketplace initiatives—all driven by and targeted at various affinity groups. The number of diverse expressions can be quite significant. The big idea is that the gospel in any city is only as vibrant as the depth of unity between diverse expressions of the church. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes, “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

**Writing Acts 29 for City Gospel Movements**

Paul embodied the following chain of critical understandings regarding cities and gospel movements:

- Cities shape culture.
- Gospel movements shape cities.
- Leaders catalyze gospel movements.

So the first step toward changing an entire culture for Christ is to combine efforts with like-minded leaders in your own city.
and to motivate and equip one another for an authentic gospel movement. My hope is that as a result of reading this book you will be motivated to become the kind of leader who accelerates the gospel in your city—and that you will join a growing army of like-minded leaders who want to do the same in cities globally.

Saul’s three commitments should cause us to evaluate our understanding of how God is at work in our own lives:

1. How radically am I following Jesus?
2. How abandoned am I to the preciousness and the unity of the church?
3. What is my geographic calling?

Paul’s life and leadership confirm that God can use one leader to influence the trajectory of global Christianity.

How about you? What has God individually positioned you to do with your unique gifting and calling to impact cities and, through cities, the world?

Take this journey with me to explore God’s grand design for your life and leadership.

Let this be your yes to Jesus. And then go invite others to say yes as well.

WHAT THIS CHAPTER TEACHES US:

*Disrupting Your City with the Gospel*

*The gospel disrupts our lives.*

Have you had that yes-or-no encounter with Jesus? Has that encounter radically reoriented the way you think about why you were created? What is different about your life as the result
of this encounter? How has your life been disrupted? Pause and enumerate how your life is different because of the gospel.

*The gospel infuses meaning into our lives.*

God is at work in time and history to redeem the world to Himself. He mysteriously allows the unfolding of empires and kingdoms, the rise and fall of leaders. You were born at a specific moment in history for a specific purpose. God has uniquely positioned you to make a difference for the gospel in your context.

*God invites us to join what He is doing in cities.*

It is a privilege to be alive at this particular moment in human history. Cities around the globe are growing exponentially. The gospel is permeating these new places just as exponentially. God has a grander purpose for our lives and in one way or another wants to connect us to His purpose in cities. If we are to connect to God’s work to reach the greatest number of people in our lifetimes, our work must be connected to cities.

**A Prayer**

*Jesus,*

*We give You permission to completely disrupt our lives in concert with Your greater purposes. We pray that You will give us the courage to be fully available to You. Teach us what we need to know, tell us where we need to go, and show us whom to join in this journey toward greater consequence in life.*

*We pray this for Your sake, for love of the great global cities of the world.*