

# PLATFORM THINKING

**If we combine the principles and practices of CBTE we can create a platform on which an array of discipleship journeys can be built.**

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# CBTE AS A PLATFORM, PT. 1

There are three aspects of a platform that are important to understand: the operational or business model, the power structure, and the educational philosophy. The first two aspects are true of most platforms. The last one is particular to how Kairos functions as a platform. Throughout this white paper, I will review these three aspects of a platform—starting with the operational/business model.

## The Operational/Business Model

The contemporary conception of a platform tends to be related to software or technology. One could argue that the evolution of the software platform has significantly impacted the trajectory of technological development. As Jeff Jarvis, author of *What Would Google Do*, wrote, “The most successful enterprises today are networks . . . and the platforms on which those networks are built.” Uber, AirBnB, iOS, MacOS, Windows, Instagram, Netflix, Amazon—all of them are platforms.

I could spend a lot of time trying to explain the nuances of a software platform. Instead, let me share a brief explanation from Ryan Sarver. He explains why Apple’s creation of the iOS platform, the software that runs the iPhone, created such a stir. By becoming a platform, they enabled developers to build applications that would make their devices more valuable to users, thus selling more devices. As more devices were sold, it created more revenue potential for app developers, thus drawing more developers to iOS. This created a very powerful network effect that drove growth on both sides of the business (developers and users) wherein development on one side directly benefited the other. In essence, a platform enables everyone in the network to progress toward stated goals relevant to his or her context.

In perhaps more simple terms, a platform is a system built around the interaction of people, businesses, institutions, etc. who create resources that are used on the platform (let’s call that group creators or developers) and people who use or participate in those resources (let’s call this group users or participants). For Uber, that means the drivers are creating resources (cars that are available to be rented) and passengers are the users or participants who engage with those resources. Uber’s role is to steward the interactions between those drivers (the creators or developers) and passengers (the users or participants).\*

Imagine with me, then, a system of theological education designed to be a platform. Not a software platform, though software will no doubt be involved, but a “people-and-process-based” platform. Rather than a seminary thinking of itself as a place where students must go and a place from where they must be sent, the seminary would serve as a connector between students and their vocations, learning experiences and their participants, learning experience creators and their sojourners, and/or vocational contexts and their needs.

As a platform, a system of theological education creates value for students by allowing them to engage in

learning that is informed by their contexts and vocations. At the same time, the system of theological education works with partners who can walk alongside students. Such a system creates value for everyone involved. The role of the seminary, then, is to steward the creators and the participants.

As a result, more individuals engage in theological education because they are able to connect to something that matters to them and be shaped in the crucible of real life. Likewise, ministries, businesses, kingdom-minded partner organizations, and mentors become a network to serve a growing and diverse group of students. The platform builds value for every part of the network. That is to say that “all ships rise” when the tide of the network rises. Students have more access to transformational journeys of discipleship that are informed by their vocational needs and contexts (rather than apart from them), while those who are invested in developing followers of Jesus have new ways to engage and interact with people who value those resources. In this approach to theological education wherein the school is a steward of a platform rather than the sole provider of educational content, formational experiences, and practical tools, the school must come to grips with a new power structure – one that seeks to inform a way of being. [Back to top.](#)

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## CBTE AS A PLATFORM, PT. 2

### Power Structures in a Platform

At times, seminaries have tended to extract rather than to add value for others within the system of theological education. Our approach to theological education tended to assume a certain level of competition, a certain “rightness” to how we did things, and a certain institutional nature of theological education. As a result, our power tends to extend into every aspect of a student’s educational journey. We tended to privilege one context or standards of excellence over all others (usually our context). Over time, power became more and more confined into the hands of a few aspects of the institution, and those are the aspects we tended to preserve at all cost. While our work as seminaries is extremely valuable, one could argue that, when we take this conventional approach, the value of a seminary doesn’t extend very far into the broader church.

Platforms invite us to think differently about power. Rather than seeking to control every aspect of a participant’s interaction, platforms seek to empower both participants and creators by giving each significant levels of power that were once reserved for a few.

For example, when Apple created the first iPhone, it also created every single app that could be used on the phone. It controlled every aspect of an individual’s interaction with the phone. Doing this allowed it to control

the look and feel of every single tap and swipe on the phone; to control what people could and could not do on the phone; to control the path people took to accomplish tasks on the phone. When it turned and created the iOS platform, it lost control of most of those things. No longer could it control the look and feel of everything (that is why some apps look great and work well and others are terribly designed and don't function). No longer could it control the path people took to accomplish tasks. Adopting a platform approach empowered 1) the people who used iOS to have control of what apps they used and how they used them and 2) the developers to have control over what apps they built and how those apps functioned.

Interestingly, when it adopted a platform approach, Apple's control diminished but its influence increased. By focusing on hardware (the actual phone), Apple gave away a lot of control and power including the tools developers use to make apps, the ways they share them with the world, and the means by which financial resources are shared across the platform. In turn, Apple gained an opportunity to be part of a larger community.

In our experience, when we focus on thinking of theological education as a platform, we see the same things happen. Our approach in Kairos invites us to give away a lot of power and control while, in turn, allowing us to be part of a broader community – one that participates in what God is doing in and through the Body of Christ. For theological education to function as a platform, we must embrace what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:9, “we are coworkers in God's service.”

In practice, that means we move from thinking of voices outside the walls of the seminary as “contributors” to thinking of them as “creators.” Currently, the opposite is true. The power dynamics of modern higher education tend to reinforce, rather than breakdown, walls. These dynamics exist within a structure that hears and attends to particular voices while other important voices are marginalized. As a result, power is held within and wielded by those who have historically been heard, therein reinforcing walls and a tendency to impose their privileged context. And power protects itself and stays confined within the institution.

CBTE invites us to be coworkers. In this power dynamic a multiplicity of equal voices is present, and the platform empowers those voices to create fresh expressions of integrated learning. In short, we move from having one group of people decide what should be created and displayed to distributing the power and privilege to create art and to put it on display. In this paradigm, Kairos focuses on the process students and partners use to define, evaluate, and affirm proficiency (the “hardware”), the tools developers use to invite students to participate in their fresh expressions of theological education, and the means by which financial resources are shared across the platform. In doing so, the authority and influence we have is rooted not in the fact that we are an “institution” or “faculty” or “administrators” but rather in the relationships we have with students, participants, creators, partners, mentors and developers. This collaborative relationship leads to the educational philosophy that must be in place in order for Kairos to function as a platform for, rather than a place of, theological education. [Back to top.](#)

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# CBTE AS A PLATFORM, PT. 3

## Educational Philosophy

When power is held within the hands of a few people and a school is the sole provider of educational content, formational experiences, and practical tools, an input-based educational philosophy begins to emerge. Such a philosophy tends to be built around the idea that quality is maintained by controlling who is providing content and the way in which that content is delivered. This approach to education begins to reinforce the idea that theological education is something that happens at a school when particular types of people are present. As purveyors of content, schools begin to place rigid structures around things like credit hours, organizational structures, governance, teaching styles, etc. These structures tend to reinforce the “contributor” power dynamics mentioned above.

Alternatively, CBTE is an educational philosophy that measures quality and progress through demonstrable outcomes rather than input. This philosophical shift is what creates the empowering dynamics of a platform. By focusing on outcomes and using a development process to encourage contextualized definitions of proficiency that are informed by the broader tradition of the Church, CBTE creates a new space for students, mentors, participants, partners, creators, and developers to collaborate. Which brings us back to the importance of principles and practices. [Back to top.](#)

*\*Disclaimer: I am very aware of the fact that all kinds of arguments can be made about how well any platform stewards its role, users, and creators. Some think Uber doesn't steward drivers very well, others think that Facebook doesn't steward participants or users very well, and still others think iOS is an impenetrable fortress of control and power. There are all kinds of wonderful, theological, ethical, important, and needed conversations that could be had regarding any software company's stewardship practices. That is not the point of this article. I am simply trying to show how a platform works.*