engaging with KELLER

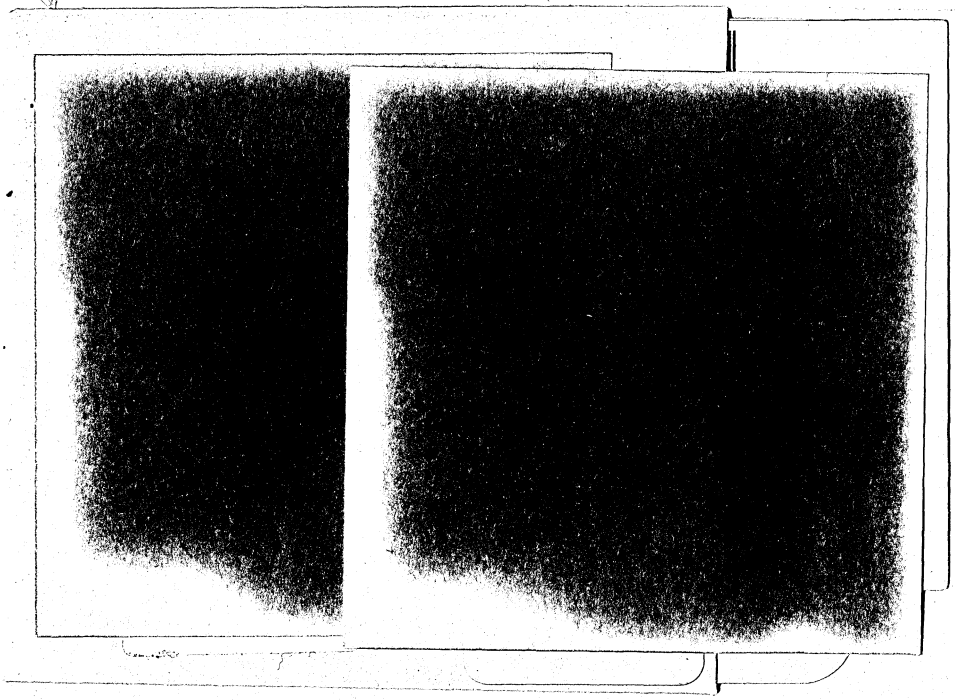
Thinking through the theology of an influential evangelical

Edited by:
Iain D. Campbell and
William M. Schweitzer

Richard Holst
Kevin J. Bidwell
D. G. Hart
Peter J. Naylor

Foreword by:
Ian Hamilton

ENGAGING WITH KELLER



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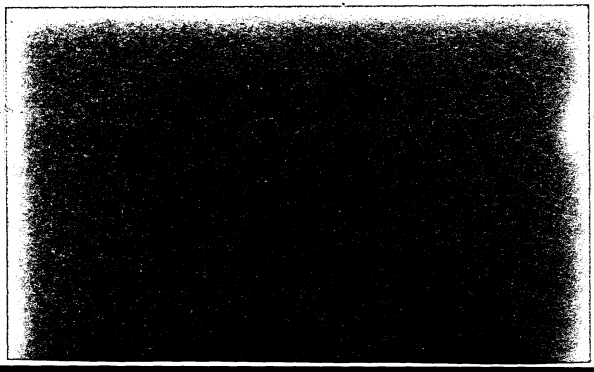

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Royalties from the sale of this book will be divided equally between the Free Church of Scotland Home Missions Board and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales Church Planting Fund.

Many now regard only one aspect of criticism, that of the expression of disapproval or hostility. There is, however, a second aspect that is equally important: the friendly analysis and judgment of the merits and faults of a project. This volume is fundamentally a critical work in the second sense. Tim Keller's teaching is as influential as it is persuasive and winsome. Thus, even if one does not agree with all the criticisms, judgments, and conclusions this volume does the Reformed and evangelical worlds a service by helping us to think through important issues raised by an important figure.

R. Scott Clark, PhD
Professor of Church History and Historical Theology
Westminster Theological Seminary California

It is a pleasure to commend this compilation of essays which critically engage with aspects of Dr Tim Keller's theology and methodology. The essays are written in a spirit of brotherly engagement, seeking not to 'nit-pick' but to highlight areas in Dr Keller's published writings which appear not to reflect, as they might, the full-orbed teaching of God's word. The essays focus on some of the 'hot button' issues that the church needs to grapple with in today's post (some would say post, post) modern culture. The church will better appreciate and assess Dr Keller's important contribution to its mission by engaging with these insightful and timely essays.

Ian Hamilton, DD
Minister
Cambridge Presbyterian Church
Cambridge, England

From the Council of Jerusalem, through the General Councils of the Early Church, to the colloquies, synods and assemblies of the Reformation Church and beyond, the identification of sound doctrine and practice, and the avoidance of doctrinal and spiritual dead-ends and worse have been achieved by rigorous debate and prayerful

reflection. This work, a collection of papers by six scholar-preachers, examines aspects of the thought and teaching of Tim Keller, the foremost proponent of the contemporary 'missional' movement, and highlights areas about which they have deep concerns. Not only that: it is a collection which will be readily understood, and interacted with, by those who would never dream of describing themselves as theologians. This book compellingly raises issues which require an answer.

John R. McIntosh, PhD
Professor of Church History
Free Church of Scotland College

The authors of this book are sincerely grateful for Tim Keller and for the Lord's blessing on his hugely influential ministry. However, they cannot help but notice that there are some aspects of his popular teaching that actually undermine the orthodox faith he so clearly seeks to promote. It is therefore only appropriate that these things be examined publicly in the light of Scripture, both for his sake and for the Church's. If the Church is to be "always reforming" she must ever examine her doctrine and practice by the Word of God. To that end the authors have not engaged in idle disputation but in wholesome, brotherly critique that is so rare in our falsely tolerant age. "Prove all things; hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21).

David B. McWilliams, PhD
Senior Minister
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Foreword

Dr. Tim Keller has done immense good for the kingdom of God as a theological teacher, innovative and imaginative pastor, and engaging apologist. His books are widely and enthusiastically read and his model of 'doing church in the city' has been widely copied. So it is first as an admirer of Dr. Keller that I write the foreword to this collection of essays on Dr. Keller's theology and methodology. However, unadulterated admiration is never desirable nor appropriate, unless it be directed to our Triune God!

The church of God is on a journey of faith together, not in atomized isolation from one another. This means we should be ready and willing, in a spirit of brotherly collegiality, to encourage and assist one another on that pilgrim journey. At times this will mean critiquing one another's ministry; never, please God, to score points, but to provoke one another to a greater conformity to Christ and a greater conformity to his word.

It is probably true that we feel more comfortable critiquing dead Christians than living ones! Think of the many useful

critiques of Calvin's theology and methodology that appeared in 2009. Perhaps we fear being thought 'overly precise', or ungenerous in our Christian profession. But Christian love is neither sentimental nor lacking in honest engagement. Our hope is that Dr. Keller will receive this critique of his theology and methodology in the spirit in which it is offered and that the church of Christ will be the richer for its engagement with the ministry of this eminent servant of God.

The areas of theology covered in this collection are central to the teaching of Scripture and to the spiritual health and effectiveness of the church. Dr. Keller has provoked the Reformed church, of which he is an enthusiastic member and defender, to engage imaginatively and creatively with our so-called postmodern world, in order to win its attention and challenge its premises. I am very thankful that he has done so. It should not surprise us that in developing new lines of thought Dr. Keller has provoked a measure of controversy, mainly within the Reformed churches. It is therefore right that there should be an open and frank engagement among brothers in Christ in order to discern just how faithful to God's word Dr. Keller's 'new lines of thought' really are.

We are, all of us, learners in the school of Christ. May the Lord use this collection to give his church a more assured understanding of the faith once for all delivered to the saints.

Rev. Dr. Ian Hamilton

Minister, Cambridge Presbyterian Church

February, 2013

List of Publications by Dr. Timothy J. Keller

Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989; 2nd edition, Phillipsburg: P&R, 1997)

Genesis: What Were We Made For? (New York: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2006)

The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism (New York: Dutton and London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008)

The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith (New York: Dutton and London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008)

Counterfeit Gods: When the Empty Promises of Love, Money and Power Let You Down (New York: Dutton and London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2009)

Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just (New York: Dutton and London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010)

Gospel in Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010)

The Meaning of Marriage (New York: Dutton and London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011)

King's Cross: the Story of the World in the Life of Jesus (New York: Dutton and London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011)

The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness (Chorley: 10Publishing, 2012)
Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012)
Every Good Endeavor (New York: Dutton and London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2012)
Galatians for You (Epsom: The Good Book Company, 2013)
Galatians: Gospel Matters: Seven Studies for Groups or Individuals (Good Book Guide) (Epsom: The Good Book Company, 2013)

Contributors

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Iain D. Campbell (MA, University of Glasgow; BD, University of London; DipTh, Free Church College; MTh, Central School of Religion; PhD, New College, Edinburgh) is minister of Point Free Church on the Isle of Lewis. He also serves as Adjunct Professor of Church History at Westminster Theological Seminary and was the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland in 2012. Dr. Campbell is the author of various books, including *The Doctrine of Sin* (Christian Focus), *On the First Day of the Week: God, the Christian and the Sabbath* (Day One), and *The Gospel According to Ruth* (Day One).

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C. Richard H. Holst (BA, University of Wales, Bangor; Dip Soc, PGCE and MPhil, University of Wales, Cardiff) was the founding minister of Bethel Presbyterian Church in Cardiff (Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales) until his retirement in 2007 and recently served as the interim pastor of First Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Sunnydale, CA. Rev. C. R. H. Holst was also a visiting lecturer in Pauline Studies and New Testament Exegesis at the Wales Evangelical School of Theology until his retirement in 2011. He is the current chairman of the International Conference of Reformed Churches.

Peter J. Naylor (BA, University of Wales, Cardiff; DPhil, Oxford University) is the founding minister of Immanuel Presbyterian Church in Cardiff (Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales). He is the author of a commentary on the Book of Numbers in *The New Bible Commentary (21st century edition* (IVP)). He lectured at Wales Evangelical School of Theology from 2000 to 2010. Since 2001 he has served as the Recording Secretary of the International Conference of Reformed Churches. Dr. Naylor is the editor of his denomination's publications, the *Presbyterian Network* and *Pray for One Another.*

William M. Schweitzer (BA, University of Rochester; BTh, Free Church College, Glasgow University; MTh and PhD, New College, Edinburgh) is ordained in the Presbyterian Church in America and serves as the church-planting minister of Gateshead Presbyterian Church (Evangelical Presbyterian Church in England and Wales). Dr. Schweitzer was previously a tutor in Systematic Theology at Edinburgh University and is the author of *God is a Communicative Being: Divine Communicativeness and Harmony in the Theology of Jonathan Edwards* (T&T Clark).

Acknowledgments

The editors would like to thank Danny Hyde, Jon D. Payne and Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. for their preliminary input into this project. Iain H. Murray, Ian Hamilton, Philip Ross and Jeffery Waddington provided consultation on the draft manuscript. We would also like to thank the directors and editors of Evangelical Press (EP), particularly Graham Hind, Mostyn Roberts and Roger Fay. Finally, we would like to thank Tim Keller for his ministry to us in his writing and his cordial interaction on these issues.

General Introduction

Iain D. Campbell and William M. Schweitzer

1. Introduction

Within a remarkably brief span of time, the contemporary church has been influenced widely and deeply by the distinctive thought of Timothy J. Keller. Evidence of this influence is not difficult to find on either side of the Atlantic. The reach of his material is vast—his books are featured in venues of every description, whether Christian or secular—and it is clear that his message is being heard. Urban church planting has become a dominant theme in domestic and foreign missions. Denominations that once regarded social activism as the poison of liberalism have been establishing cultural transformation projects ranging from art ministry to community business development. Various elements of Keller's distinctive teaching for postmodern people are increasingly becoming commonplace in the preaching of Reformed churches. In brief, Keller has become one of the most influential evangelical leaders of our time.

The contributors to this book are themselves examples of

this influence. We have all benefited in various ways from Tim Keller's extensive ministry. However, even the best of theological or methodological developments will benefit from critical reflection. Thus far, the level of theological engagement accompanying this widespread influence has been anything but proportionate to its magnitude. There has been very limited discussion of objections to Keller's wide-ranging program. Indeed, one might ask, what exactly are the potential objections to his teaching? Would these objections apply to the whole of Keller's thought, or are there some particular areas of concern that might yet encourage appropriation of others? At the moment, these basic questions remain unanswered.

It is into this void that the contributors of this book speak. They speak as scholars, pastors, and church planters. As scholars in the disciplines of systematic and historical theology, biblical studies, and church history, they have the requisite competence to do this work in their particular topics. However, they do not speak as ivory tower academics but, like Keller himself, as pastor-scholars. They are all ordained elders in confessional Presbyterian churches, shepherding the people of God. It is for the benefit of these flocks, as well as for the many others like them across our denominations, that the contributors explore these issues. Finally, the contributors speak as those who have been engaged in the work of church planting. It is just because they care deeply about reaching the lost that they want to ensure that the church's proclamation is a clear and faithful transmission of the 'everlasting gospel' (Rev. 14:6).

So while the engagement is largely scholarly, this is no mere academic exercise; real elders are speaking with real concern for the well-being of the church. On the other hand, however, it should be made clear that this book is certainly not 'personal'

in terms of Dr. Keller. Again, we have all benefited from various aspects of his teaching and particularly from his example as a church planter. Those who have interacted with him can attest to his warm cordiality even in trying circumstances. Nor is this book seeking to make any statement about his personal orthodoxy. We gladly acknowledge that Keller *intends* to teach the orthodox truth; the question is whether or not he fully succeeds in this good intention in the specific cases considered below.

We think that the root of the difficulty arises from the very challenging task that Keller has assigned himself—to communicate the old orthodoxy in 'relevant' ways to a contemporary, postmodern audience. Of course, the gospel must certainly be communicated to every generation and to every culture, for this is what obedience to the Great Commission entails. Yet in so doing, we must avoid the temptation to cut corners. We must ensure that all the elements of the truth—the highly offensive aspects as well as the ones that are more attractive—are reflected in our teaching. Simply put, the essays in this book consider whether some specific aspects of Keller's teaching are biblically accurate ways of transmitting the Reformed faith.

2. Basic questions about this book

In the course of this book's development, the editors and contributors have interacted with men across the spectrum of Reformed denominations. A few questions have been asked with sufficient frequency that we thought that it might be good to address them here at the outset.

a. Why do we need to debate over theology?

To answer that question adequately, we would probably need a separate book devoted to the nature and role of polemic

theology. However, we could start by simply quoting Dr Keller. He write, 'To maintain a healthy movement over time, we have to engage in direct discussion about any doctrinal errors we perceive,' a statement which is followed by guidelines for engaging in 'gospel polemics'.[1] We also might point out that the degree to which people value the truth is the degree to which they are willing to engage in public debate over it. This is the way any enterprise that *depends* upon truth for its success and continued existence is maintained. One example would be medical science, in which fellow doctors challenge the findings and procedures of their peers in journals. Everyone understands that this public debate is not done out of idle curiosity or a vindictive spirit, but because lives depend upon getting it right. Another example would be aviation safety, in which every detail of an accident—not merely the obvious blunders but even the most minute departures from optimal procedure—are held up for public scrutiny along with specific recommendations to ensure such lapses are never repeated. This is what happens when the truth is perceived as something not merely 'nice to have' but essential and crucial.

The reality is, however, that ours is not an age characterized by great appreciation of doctrinal purity. Even those who reject the *zeitgeist* enough to value the idea of orthodoxy do not always recognize the reality of what maintaining it actually entails. Argument itself is often conceived as something inherently negative, something to be done (if at all) with those you dislike or intend to dismiss. From this perspective, the very idea that Christian brothers who love and genuinely appreciate one another would want to engage in rigorous theological debate seems hard to imagine. We may want truth, but we lack the appetite to do the unpleasant things—including a willingness

to argue with good men with whom we have much in common—that are necessary to have it. We are like the man who professes great admiration for a beautiful garden but disdains the 'unseemly' work of weeding and pruning that is required to maintain it.

Yet this is the way that the Christian church used to go about the business of upholding orthodoxy. Truth was known to be critical to the enterprise at hand. Even minor departures might endanger eternal souls and would certainly derogate from the glory of God; theology was therefore something that was very much worth fighting over. Indeed, how is it that the church ever came to be in possession of the comprehensive, detailed system of theology we now take for granted? It was largely through arguments among believers, epitomized by the spirited debates between fellow Reformed evangelicals on the floor of the Westminster Assembly. If the Christians of today want to enjoy the blessing given to previous generations we look back on as being blessed with great spiritual vitality and gospel fruit, we must similarly be willing to do the same sort of unpleasant but absolutely necessary critical engagement.

b. Why not just get on with the work of the gospel?

A related question is, why not simply get on with the work of the gospel? To answer, we refer to the case of Jonathan Edwards. There is no doubt that Edwards was a zealous evangelist; yet he devoted great amounts of his time towards treatises to correct what sometimes appeared to be inconsequential theological issues. Why? Because, at least in Edwards' mind, these pursuits were intimately related:

> And this increase of light shall be very much by means of ministers; God will make use of his own institution and bless them in order to bring about this increase of light ... he will

make use of them at that day to clear divine truths and to refute errors, and to reclaim and correct God's people wherein in any respect they have been mistaken and have been going out of the way of duty.[2]

Why did Edwards not simply 'get on with the business of the gospel' rather than spend time writing against what some would consider minor doctrinal problems?[3] It is because he believed that the clarity and purity of the message were essential to its efficacy under God, and that this work was of no less importance than his preaching. From this perspective, clarifying the message *is* to get on with the business of the gospel.

c. If you are going to debate with someone, why choose a good man like Tim Keller?

The simple answer is, *precisely because Tim Keller is a good man.* His work actually *deserves* such interaction. This is the sort of thing you do with important teachers who merit being taken seriously. Not every man warrants such attention. If Keller were some dubious figure on the edge of the church, there would be little point to the exercise. No, it is just because Keller is a good man who is so widely admired that he has merited the sustained attention of our contributors.

d. What are you suggesting about Keller's orthodoxy?

Keller has consistently demonstrated his commitment to Reformed orthodoxy in numerous ways. He is ordained in the Presbyterian Church in America, a communion which is dedicated to biblical orthodoxy as understood by the Westminster standards. He chooses to serve at seminaries such as Westminster Theological Seminary which are explicitly committed to confessional standards. He affirms catechetical instruction and

has published a 'New City Catechism' that, for the most part, simply reiterates pre-existing Reformed confessions and catechisms.[4] Most recently, he has publicly critiqued the New Perspective on Paul.[5] These things all indicate to us that Keller is orthodox in his beliefs.

The problem comes in the way he chooses to *express* his orthodox faith. Keller seems to have assigned himself a very demanding project: to package Christianity for the contemporary unchurched and largely postmodern audience. It almost goes without saying that such a project comes with a very real danger of overreach. Early drafts of such a project could easily outstrip the bounds of confessional teaching without realizing it.

Some people think that critiquing someone's theology implies that we must also be impugning the man's character or his motivations. But this is hardly the case. Theology is a demanding business, and the best of us get it wrong sometimes. For instance, John Calvin's esteem for Augustine is not in any doubt. However, at various points in *The Institutes* Calvin was compelled to differ with him. In so doing, he did not call into question Augustine's character, motivations, or indeed his usefulness as a teacher of the church in many other areas. He was merely helping us to be discerning, and would have been remiss to have passed over the issue in silence. So esteem for the man and criticism of his teaching need not be mutually exclusive. Likewise, this book is concerned with ideas and their implications, not the man behind them.

e. *What about the requirement in Matthew 18 to confront our brother privately? Have you talked with Keller about your concerns?*

A question that was sometimes asked while this book was in

preparation was, 'Have you first raised these issues with Keller personally?' The simple answer would be to say that one of the editors engaged with Keller on the main issues back in 2008 in a substantive email exchange.[6] The editors then sent Keller the list of contents, contributors, and editorial guidelines in 2010. At this point, Dr. Keller was invited to respond to these concerns within the pages of this book. However, due to the great demands on his time, he was compelled to decline the invitation. He was presented with the full manuscript in 2013 prior to publication.

However, as Rick Phillips has reminded us, we ought to recognize that theological debate is not governed by the instructions in Matthew 18:15–17.[7] As the church has consistently understood this passage throughout history, it is sin rather than public teaching that is to be dealt with in this way. Simply put, Dr. Keller has not sinned against us and we are not accusing him of sin. Rather, this is a public discussion of public teaching, published so that the same audience that has heard this teaching has the opportunity to hear questions about it raised.

f. This seems to focus disproportionately on a minority of Keller's work. What about all the rest?

We are very thankful to say that this book does indeed focus disproportionately on a minority of Keller's work. We are concerned with the way Keller conveys some specific doctrines, such as a teaching on creation that seems to legitimize theistic evolution; a teaching on sin that seems to overemphasize the impersonal effects of sin in this life and underemphasize sin as disobedience to the law of God; a doctrine of hell that seems to minimize God's role in condemning sinners to hell or meting out wrath; a 'divine dance' teaching on the Trinity that seems

to undermine the eternal begetting of the Son and the procession of the Spirit; and a teaching on the mission of the church that seems to say that our given task is to transform the culture. We think that the church would be better off not emulating Keller in these specific teachings. Nor do we think that his is the best example to follow in terms of the highest standards of Reformed hermeneutics or consistently Presbyterian churchmanship. We have felt compelled to point this out because his extraordinary influence means that he is and will be imitated in every regard. However, it is only right to say that there is a lot more to Keller than these particular things, and we are glad to recommend him in them. In other words, our counsel to the church would be: imitate Keller, but not in these specific ways.

3. Themes or big picture issues

With these questions answered, there are also a few themes or issues that recur throughout the book which are worth a brief introduction now.

a. The limits of apologetics

Keller sometimes writes explicitly as an apologist (particularly in *The Reason for God*). Throughout his work, however, he implicitly expresses apologetic concerns. He clearly wants to gain a hearing for the Christian faith from those who are skeptical of it. In so doing, Keller becomes subject to all the limits and tensions that apply to any other apologist. The apologist's task has often been understood as explaining why Christianity accords with what is considered reasonable by the outside world. The basic problem, of course, is that biblical doctrine—and particularly the gospel of Christ crucified—is

inherently offensive to human reason (1 Cor. 1:23). There is thus a sizeable gulf between truth and the contemporary standards of what is deemed acceptable in any era. Naturally, men faced with such a situation have often been tempted to shorten that distance by toning down the doctrine to make it less offensive.

Indeed, this is one way to understand the complex problem of Christian theology throughout the ages. On the one hand, it is the history of men who knowingly deceive the church (1 Peter 2:1). On the other hand, it is the tragic story of those who want to win the world but let their apologetic intentions get the better of them.[8] Apologetic writing is an inherently hazardous occupation that requires objective scrutiny rather than free passes on the basis of sincerity and good intentions. Indeed, the great difference between the true apologist (such as our brother Tim Keller) and the false teacher is precisely in a willingness to submit their teaching to the welcome oversight of the orthodox church in case they happen to get it wrong somewhere. This book will proceed with this in mind.

b. Two different answers for two different groups of people

One aspect of Keller's project that is somewhat different from many previous attempts at rendering Christianity relevant to the culture is that Keller adopts a twofold answer to many questions. He wants to present doctrine to the 'moderns' (usually older, more rural and less educated) one way, and to the 'postmoderns' (usually younger, more urban and educated) in a different way. Keller's presentation to the moderns is essentially old-fashioned orthodoxy, whereas his answers to the postmoderns include some of his most well-known—and often most

controversial—teachings. This book is almost exclusively concerned with this latter group of teachings. As we shall see, it is not merely a case of using some new language to offer the same answer to the same question. In several cases, Keller's teaching for postmoderns seems to end up offering substantively *different* answers to the same questions. Demonstrating the reality of this difference is an important contribution of these essays.

c. Theological genealogy

In the course of this book, the contributors sometimes point to some less orthodox theologians who have said some of the things that Keller seems to be saying. This does not imply that we think that Keller actually got his theology from these figures, nor that just because these figures taught these things Keller is thereby erroneous. Nonetheless, it is useful to establish where these ideas might have their natural place and function, because succeeding generations have a tendency to pursue even the tentative ideas of their fathers to logical consistencies.

d. Vigorous debate

Finally, it ought to be noted that the contributors care about their subjects and want to speak persuasively on them. This means that they often make their points in forceful ways. This should not be regarded as stemming from any personal animosity—for we hope we have none towards our dear brother—but rather from an abiding passion for God's truth. Moreover, none of us regard the contents of this book as the final word on these matters. Rather, we hope that this is the start of a fruitful public debate.

Roadmap

With these elements of introduction in place, let us now summarize the contents of the chapters.

Chapter One

Preacher, historian and theologian Iain D. Campbell considers the various ways in which Keller conveys the doctrine of sin. Campbell begins by pointing out just how central this particular doctrine is to the gospel itself: 'If the gospel is the solution to anything, it is the solution to this particular problem.' Therefore, ensuring that our definition of sin is correct is tantamount to ensuring that the gospel is right. Keller's approach to this issue is to 'rebrand' the concept into something that his postmodern audience can relate to, usually in terms of false identity, idolatry (Kierkegaard), or 'lostness'. But is this attempt to 'rebrand' sin a success? Campbell concludes that, while these efforts to communicate this all-important concept to the contemporary unchurched are admirable, Keller's attempt at rebranding sin actually obscures some aspects of the human problem, unwittingly leading to a truncated view of the gospel.

Chapter Two

Church planter and systematic theologian William M. Schweitzer addresses the interrelated issues of judgment and hell. Keller has two different ways of communicating hell, one for 'traditionalists' and the other for 'postmoderns'. For the postmodern audience, Keller takes his cues from C. S. Lewis, proposing a hell that God does not send anyone to, in which the punishment is self-inflicted, and from which no one ever asks to leave. However, Schweitzer questions whether this depiction is altogether a consistent communication of the

biblical doctrine. Specifically, Schweitzer compares Keller's explanation with the biblical teaching that God sends people to hell, decides that they stay there, and metes out the punishment in his divine wrath. Also, since Keller makes a limited appeal to Jonathan Edwards, Schweitzer explores Edwards' teaching on the subject. In consideration of the biblical mandate to warn people clearly, Schweitzer concludes that the C. S. Lewis explanation of hell ought to be rejected.

Chapter Three

Church planter and systematic theologian Kevin J. Bidwell notes that an important part of Keller's message is a recovery of the doctrine of the Trinity. This is a very welcome development, and one that Dr. Bidwell commends. However, in his desire to accomplish this aim, Keller employs an idiom—the 'divine dance'—that is a newcomer to the history of this doctrine. The question that Bidwell considers is whether this imagery is altogether faithful to Scripture and the Reformed tradition. Specifically, does it do justice to various elements of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, such as the unity of the Godhead, the ordering of the three persons in terms of eternal begetting and procession, and the authority-submission relationship between the Father and the Son in redemption? Bidwell's investigation leads to the suggestion that the 'divine dance' unintentionally undermines these important elements of the orthodox truth.

Chapter Four

Minister and Old Testament scholar Peter J. Naylor examines the mission of the church. Keller's understanding of the church's mission is one of his most important contributions, and is found at least implicitly throughout his work. As reflected in

Redeemer's motto, 'seeking to renew the City, Socially, Spiritually & Culturally', he believes that the church has a twofold mission: to preach the gospel and to do justice, which involves social and cultural transformation. Naylor recognizes that Keller's widespread influence means that his ideas about the church's task will be adopted by many. We can in truth be thankful that Keller exhorts us to Christian love and good works. Even so, it is apparent that Keller's work calls for a careful examination. Naylor concludes that the church's mission is actually more straightforward than what usually comes across in Keller's books; to make disciples through the ordinary means of grace.

Chapter Five

In addition to the pastoral ministry, C. Richard Holst has for many years taught hermeneutics to seminarians. Therefore, the question that concerns him is simply this: does Tim Keller's work provide the church with a good example of how to interpret Scripture? Keller's immense following means that his demonstrated method of interpreting Scripture will surely be emulated; but will this be a positive development in the church? Holst begins by establishing an accepted norm for Reformed hermeneutics. From there, he examines some questionable portions of Keller's work, asking the following questions: Do his interpretations represent the truth that is chiefly taught in that place? Does he use the clearer parts of Scripture to interpret the less clear? And finally, are his deductions from Scripture good and necessary consequences? Holst concludes that, while none of us attain to the perfect ideal of biblical interpretation, Keller's apparent preference for rhetorical effect over disciplined hermeneutic does not recommend him as the best of contemporary examples to follow.

Chapter Six

William M. Schweitzer considers the doctrine of creation. Keller thinks that 'there are a variety of ways in which God could have brought about the creation of life forms and human life using evolutionary processes, and that the picture of incompatibility between orthodox faith and evolutionary biology is greatly overdrawn'.[9] However, Schweitzer questions whether this approach is a coherent and faithful way of communicating the biblical position on creation. If Keller's account depends upon the process of evolution (a process of gradual improvement from less successful to more successful beings using death as the selective mechanism), it seems incompatible with the special creation of Adam as a man made perfectly in the image of God, having no living antecedent. On the other hand, inasmuch as Keller's account depends upon special creation, it is equally incompatible with Darwinian evolution. Schweitzer concludes that Keller's approach is thus unsuccessful.

Chapter Seven

American church historian D. G. Hart considers the subject of ecclesiology, not only in terms of Keller's actual writing but also in terms of his implicit messages and influence within evangelicalism. Although Keller is the most famous Presbyterian pastor in the United States today, Hart notes that it is debatable to what extent he exemplifies or promotes a specifically Presbyterian form of church government. First, through the Gospel Coalition, Keller encourages evangelicals to think of themselves as Reformed even when they do not belong to Reformed churches. Second, Keller's Redeemer Network and other interdenominational cooperation seem to undermine

the importance of Presbyterianism within his own denomination. In both of these cases Keller's demonstrated ecclesiology has encouraged many Protestants in the United States to conceive of Reformed Protestantism as something distinct from ecclesiology. After examining these issues, Hart asks whether Keller's Presbyterianism actually functions in any vital way for him and his congregation; and if not, why not? Hart understands that these questions are not limited to Keller personally, but are in common with many contemporary churches, and thus all the more worth answering.

With this larger picture in mind, we turn to the ways in which Keller rebrands the concept of sin.

Endnotes

1. *Center Church*, p. 372.
2. Edwards, 'Christ the Example of Gospel Ministers', in *Works*, vol. 25 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 444.
3. Edwards' theological works were invariably written against the errors of particular figures who would claim the name Christian, and in some cases, those who were otherwise orthodox. The most notable example would be how *Freedom of the Will* was in part written against fellow Reformed evangelical Isaac Watts. See Paul Ramsey, 'Editor's Introduction', in *Works*, vol. 1 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 65.
4. See *Center Church*, p. 56.
5. *Galatians for You*, pp. 195–197.
6. Personal email correspondence between Tim Keller and William M. Schweitzer of 5–8 September 2008, facilitated through Dr. Keller's assistant Andi Brindley.
7. Rick Phillips, 'Four Reasons Why Public Critique Does Not Invoke Matthew 18', www.reformation21.org/blog/2012/03/four-reasons-why-public-critiq.php.
8. Even the stereotypical heretic Michael Servetus embodied something of both aspects. Among other motivations, he was driven by genuine apologetic concern for the Jews and Muslims of his native Spain: 'Worst of all, the doctrine of the Trinity incurs the ridicule of the Mohammedans and the Jews' (Servetus, *Errors of the Trinity* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932], p. 4). Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone remark that Servetus' *Errors of the Trinity* '... is hardly heretical in intent', but, in the words of Servetus' twentieth-century Unitarian translator Earl Wilbur, 'is suffused with passionate earnestness, warm piety, an ardent reverence for Scripture, and a love for Christ so mystical and overpowering that [he] can

hardly find words to express it' (Earl Morse Wilbur, *A History of Unitarianism: Socinianism and its Antecedents* [University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University], quoted in Lawrence and Nancy Goldstone, *Out of the Flames: The Remarkable Story of a Fearless Scholar, a Fatal Heresy, and One of the Rarest Books in the World* [New York, NY: Broadway Books, 2002], pp. 71–72).

9. Keller, 2009 'Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople', The Biologos Foundation, http://biologos.org/uploads/projects/Keller_white_paper.pdf (accessed 3 July 2012).

Keller on 'Rebranding' the Doctrine of Sin

Iain D. Campbell

Introduction

On the *Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals* blog, Reformation 21, Rick Phillips wrote: 'Our poor friend Tim Keller suffers the fate of having his every word parsed over a thousand times, which is the inevitable result of the vast influence his every word exerts over the Neo-Evangelical, Young, Restless, and Reformed.'[1] There is always the danger that interaction with popular and influential figures like Tim Keller will indeed lead to minute and over-zealous scrutiny of his words rather than thoughtful engagement with his meaning.

Yet words are the stock-in-trade of theologians and preachers, and by using them we invite analysis of them. When it comes to the gospel, our word choices are of supreme importance, and must align with the final Word of Scripture. If they do not, then we shall certainly mislead people.

Any presentation of the gospel has to deal with the problem

of sin. If the gospel is the solution to anything, it is the solution to this particular problem. Keller recognizes this: his attempts to engage with modern culture in his presentation of the gospel wrestle with the issue of sin, and his influence invites careful analysis of his presentation. So while we wish to avoid undue 'parsing' of Keller's vocabulary as we examine his doctrine of sin, we will attempt to evaluate his teaching by seeking to let him speak for himself.

Keller has not only come to the attention of the 'young, restless and reformed' constituency, of course; he has also been noticed by the secular media. An article on the USA Today website which describes Keller as 'a modern-day variation of the circuit-riding preacher', quotes him as saying that the concept of sin is vital to evangelical preaching, but that his audience requires a rebranding of the concept:

> 'They do get the idea of branding, of taking a word or term and filling it with your own content, so I have to rebrand the word "sin",' Keller says. 'Around here it means self-centeredness, the acorn from which it all grows. Individually, that means "I live for myself, for my own glory and happiness, and I'll work for your happiness if it helps me." Communally, self-centeredness is destroying peace and justice in the world, tearing the net of interwovenness, the fabric of humanity.'[2]

In one of his most recent works, *Center Church*, Keller gives explicit pragmatic justification for his approach. He says:

> When I first began ministry in Manhattan, I encountered a cultural allergy to the Christian concept of sin. I found that I got the most traction with people, however, when I turned to

> the Bible's extensive teaching on idolatry. Sin, I explained, is building your life's meaning on any thing—even a very good thing—more than on God. Whatever else we build our life on will drive our passions and choices and end up enslaving us.[3]

Keller also suggests that simply to define sin as a violation of God's law is problematic in a postmodern culture, and raises 'philosophical issues'[4] which arise out of any attempt to begin our evangelistic engagement with the current generation with reference to the moral code of an ancient Israelite society. Hence the need to rebrand.

The idea of 'rebranding' a biblical doctrine such as sin is an interesting proposition. To do this successfully would mean that the presentation is altered but the content remains the same. Is Keller's attempt to 'rebrand' sin a success? The only way to decide is to see how he describes the human condition in his published works and to assess his doctrinal position in the light of Scripture.

Sin as Identity

One of Keller's first books was *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, a popular apologetic for evangelical belief, aimed at both skeptics and believers. In his introduction, Keller gives some personal information as a backdrop to the writing of this book. He highlights some of the barriers which appeared during his college years both as challenges to his faith and as defining trajectories for his later thinking. First there was an intellectual barrier, in which difficult questions arose in Keller's thinking to which Christianity gradually appeared the only feasible solution. Second, there was a personal barrier, which was overcome by experience and the living out of the faith he

had embraced. Third, there was a social barrier, in which he came to appreciate the importance of community and, therefore, the church.[5]

For Keller, the culture into which we communicate the gospel has become a divided one, with growth in religious faith paralleling growth in skepticism. For Keller this is no bad thing; there are difficult questions with which believers need to wrestle, as there are faith positions with which skeptics need to grapple. In the light of this, Keller's book looks first at the difficult questions which the gospel cannot ignore: questions of theodicy, science and the interpretation of Scripture.

In the second part of the book, Keller examines the key components of biblical faith: the existence of God, the nature of religion, the cross and resurrection of Christ. It is in this second section that Keller deals specifically (in chapter 10) with 'The Problem of Sin'.

Notwithstanding the fact that any talk of sin is 'offensive or ludicrous to many', Keller's starting-point is that everybody recognizes that something is wrong in the world.[6] Although Christianity defines that problem as the problem of sin, it is false to think, argues Keller, that this is bare pessimism. Quite the opposite: 'The Christian doctrine of sin, properly understood, can be a great resource for human hope.'[7] Keller's starting-point, as he expounds that doctrine, is from the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, from whom Keller concludes that 'sin is the despairing refusal to find your deepest identity in your relationship and service to God. Sin is seeking to become oneself, to get an identity, apart from him.'[8]

Keller wants to move his readers away from the idea that sin can be defined merely in terms of breaking divine rules; that is, in breaking the commandments of God. He instead defines

sin as that which replaces God in giving a person his or her identity. Sin is 'not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into ultimate things'.[9] Illustrating this from popular culture, Keller goes on to highlight the consequences of these forms of self-identity. When we identify ourselves in the light of our status, achievements, relationships, or other God-substitutes, Keller argues that we destroy ourselves. We open the door to fear, with the paralysis fear brings. We give way to bitterness, insecurity, addiction and emptiness. By refusing to build our lives on a relationship to God, we build for ourselves castles of disillusionment and despair.

Sin, however, affects us socially, not merely personally. By identifying ourselves with race or status or ethnicity we invariably develop enmity and hostility towards other expressions of race, status and ethnicity. We destroy the social fabric, since

> the real culture war is taking place inside our own disordered hearts, wracked by inordinate desires for things that control us, that lead us to feel superior, and exclude those without them, and that fail to satisfy us even when we get them.[10]

And therefore sin has cosmic consequences too, as the original peace, wholeness and joyful life purposed by God for the universe is lost by man's inability and unwillingness to find his pleasure and his purpose in God. Thus only the rebuilding of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ can deal with this problem.

All of this seems fresh, relevant and connected with popular culture. Keller has a remarkable way of weaving insights from philosophy, history, and even film and television into his efforts to contextualize and contemporize the gospel story. Ironically,

however, his greatest weakness is his failure to ground his insights in the biblical narrative itself.

Interestingly, while Keller's discussion of the problem of sin in *The Reason for God* draws from sources as diverse as H.G. Wells and the *Rocky* movie, his chapter on the problem of sin contains some ten pages of text before the Bible is even mentioned. The definition of sin excludes any discussion of biblical teaching, and the personal and social consequences of sin are explored without reference to biblical teaching. Only when he comes to deal with the cosmic dimension and consequence of sin does Keller reference passages in Genesis and Romans.

Perhaps Keller has a rationale for this form of apologetic, since he is laboring to address both a world of questioners and doubters and a world of new Christians who come to orthodoxy with more questions and answers—what Keller calls his 'spiritual third way' of presenting the Christian faith.[11] Yet by his own admission, 'An authoritative Bible is not the enemy of a personal relationship with God. It is the precondition for it.'[12]

If this statement affirming the absolute necessity of Scripture to inform our relationship with God is true—as it undoubtedly is—it is more than passing strange that the Bible is not called as an authority on the nature of sin as the fundamental problem of the world. If it had been, then perhaps Keller would not have been so quick to dismiss a definition of sin as a breaking of God's rules. For that is the Bible's own definition. The standard, for example, by which it could be ascertained that one had sinned—and therefore required some kind of atonement—was that the law had been broken: 'If anyone sins, doing any of the things that by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done ...' says Leviticus 5:17.[13] Similarly, in the New Testament, James 4:17 says that 'Whoever knows the

right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.' And 'the right thing to do' is that which has been required by the 'one lawgiver and judge' of whom James speaks (in 4:12).

According to 1 John 3:4, 'Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.' That does not mean that sin can be defined by the absence of law; quite the opposite. It is defined by the disregard of law, by the refusal to submit to law. And it is the defining characteristic of our fallenness that the mind of man, in his natural, fallen condition, 'does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot' (Rom. 8:7). That is the tragedy of sin.

Keller does not deny this; yet having dismissed defining sin as disobedience, he then absolutizes the prohibition of idolatry in the first commandment and defines sin through the lens of that particular proscription. Subsequently, as we shall see, the identification of sin with idolatry becomes a prominent motif in his other writings.

But this definition becomes problematic in its tendency both to subjectivize and to relativize the issue. That is to say, the focus shifts in a subtle manner away from the God against whom the sin is committed, and whose law has been broken, to the way in which men and women have carved out other gods for themselves, and thus created their own sin problem by self-identification through a relationship to someone or something other than the God of the Bible. This is not to deny that there is a subjective element in sin. It is the most subjective problem in the world. Yet the root of this subjectivity lies not in how individual sinners choose their own God-substitutes but in the fact that all sinners oppose a personal God who is their sovereign law-giver. In the light of this, there is something quite misleading in the presentation of sin as 'a resource for

hope'. In Keller's presentation, the hope-ful aspect of the doctrine is that it addresses the real issue, avoiding definitions of sin that focus merely on sociology or psychology. Yet sin is a reason for hope only in the way in which diagnosing the true nature of a fatal disease is a ground for offering the right cure. To know that I have a disease which can kill me is not a resource for hope; but to know that there is a cure for it is.

Keller would not deny this, of course, and his discussion on the cross is replete with the language of 'costly suffering':

> There was a debt to be paid—God himself paid it. There was a penalty to be borne—God himself bore it. Forgiveness is always a form of costly suffering.[14]

But the language of penalty itself throws us back onto our definitions of sin. What does it mean for the death of Christ to be *penal* substitution? It means, surely, that the law enacts its payment in full. The threat for the disobedience is carried through. The cross does not overcompensate: it honors the law in every particular, so that the breach of the commandment that is the definition of sin becomes the judicial basis on which the death of Christ becomes an atonement. It is precisely for this reason that Keller's definition of sin as a false identity ultimately fails: by itself, it cannot explain the cross.

Sin as Idolatry

In *Counterfeit Gods*, Keller further elaborates on his thesis that the basic problem of the human condition is the problem of idolatry. With a skillful interplay of biblical narratives, he demonstrates that the personal human condition is characterized by a quest for romantic love, financial prosperity or political

success. He also argues that Western culture is also dominated by idols, both in business and in religion. Keller's analysis and application of the story of Jonah is telling in this regard:

> When an idol gets a grip on your heart, it spins out a whole set of false definitions of success and failure and happiness and sadness. It redefines reality in terms of itself. Nearly everyone thinks that an all-powerful God of love, patience and compassion is a good thing. But if, because of your idol, your ultimate good is the power and status of your people, then anything that gets in the way of it is, by definition, bad. When God's love prevented him from smashing Israel's enemy, Jonah, because of his idol, was forced to see God's love as a bad thing. In the end idols can make it possible to call evil good and good evil.[15]

Keller's working of the concept of idolatry is an interesting one. He suggests that a failure to appreciate the difference between the true God and the idols to which we are enslaved becomes ultimately a failure to deal with guilt and shame:

> Idols function like gods in our lives, and so if we make career or parental approval our god and we fail it, then the idol curses us in our hearts for the rest of our lives. We can't shake the sense of failure.[16]

For Keller, idolatry is not simply one expression of sin, but the root out of which every sin arises. On the basis of Paul's argument in Romans 1:21, 25, Keller suggests that for Paul 'idolatry is not only one sin among many, but what is fundamentally wrong with the human heart';[17] and although he acknowledges that 'Paul goes on to make a long list of sins

that create misery and evil in the world', his main line of reasoning is that 'they all find their roots in this soil, the inexorable human drive for "god-making"'.[18] This, he suggests, is also the reason that the Ten Commandments open with a prohibition against idolatry: 'We never break the other commandments without breaking the first one.'[19]

Keller goes on to explain the experience of forgiveness as a rejoicing in what Christ has done for us. He says that 'it is when we rejoice over Jesus' sacrificial love for us most fully that, paradoxically, we are most truly convicted of our sin'.[20] His suggestion that idols are almost always good things is well taken; there is nothing inherently wrong in the things on which people set their hearts. It is the displacement of God in the human heart that is wrong.

The gospel impacts us through the spiritual disciplines of worship, 'and it is worship that is the final way to replace the idols of your heart. You cannot get relief simply by figuring out your idols intellectually. You have to actually get the peace that Jesus gives, and that only comes as you worship. Analysis can help you discover truths, but then you need to "pray them in" to your heart.'[21] This replacement of idols with a passion for Christ is, Keller suggests in the epilogue, the work of a lifetime.

Here then is Keller's basic thesis both of our condition and God's remedy for it. Our problem is the problem of idolatry, which may take many forms, but is basically the taking of things that are essentially good and worthwhile, and making them our substitute gods. Our enslavement to them leads to a distortion of reality and a corresponding failure to experience the peace of forgiveness; only by treasuring Christ can the distortion be righted.

Part of the problem with this approach is its subjectivity. When Keller says in *Center Church* that 'The biblical theme of idolatry challenges contemporary people ... It shows them that, paradoxically, if they don't serve God, they are not, and can never be, as free as they aspire to be',[22] he sounds more like a life coach than a gospel preacher. The primary focus of the gospel is to restore our relationship with God, not our personal wellbeing.

For all Keller's discussion of biblical narratives, however, it is difficult to agree with him that Paul's basic thesis in Romans 1 is that idolatry is the basic human problem, the soil out of which every sin grows.[23] It could be argued that this is to reverse the Pauline argument, which is that unrighteousness, or sin, leads to a suppression of the knowable truth about God, which in turn is expressed by creature worship instead of by Creator worship. For Paul, the idolatry is the symptom, not the cause. A case could be made that while Paul argues for a basic, inexcusable and unjustifiable condition of fallenness which finds expression in idolatry, Keller has actually turned this on its head, and made the idolatry the basic issue, and every other sin a symptom and result of it.

Paul's thesis is that the gospel is God's power for salvation to everyone who believes. This is the foundation upon which the argument of Romans is built: every one of us is inexcusable, and consequently every one of us is in need of an objective atonement. But that is part of the problem in *Counterfeit Gods*: although there is reference to God's unconditional love and costly grace, alongside references to Jesus' costly death,[24] there is little explanation here of what the gospel means, or what it is that Jesus actually did. The emphasis falls on our use of spiritual disciplines as a means to replacing our idols, and on

the getting rid of idols as a means to overcoming guilt and shame. Without qualification, such subjectivism can actually serve to turn the gospel on its head.

Keller excels in *Counterfeit Gods* in unpacking the symptoms of sin. His use of the concept of idolatry is well grounded in the biblical narrative—we are warned, after all, even as late as the Epistles of John, to keep ourselves from idols (1 John 5:21). Idolatry was not merely an Old Testament phenomenon. And Keller is echoing one of Calvin's great descriptions of the heart of man as 'a perpetual factory of idols'.[25] His application of the concept of idolatry to the condition of modern man is therefore a timely use of a biblical and theological motif.

But more than a mere 'rebranding' is going on here. Without careful parameters, the confusion of symptom and cause becomes problematic. There is no doubt that modern man is expert in the manufacture of idols, and Keller's work bridges the ancient text and modern psychology at a variety of levels. But the nature of sin is not idol-making but law-breaking, of which the manufacturing of idols is a specific example. The truth of the human condition is not merely that we make idols, but that we are, by nature, enslaved to law-breaking.

On this point, Douglas Vickers' observation is apposite:

> Sin ... as it is presented to us in the Scriptures, does not have primary reference to our actions and to what we do or do not do. That aspect of its meaning must, of course, be clearly acknowledged and understood. But sin in its essence has primarily to do with the state and condition in which, as a result of Adam's fall, we actually exist ... By our fall into the 'estate of sin', we were deprived of our original holiness and righteousness, and we were depraved in the corruption of our whole nature.[26]

The condition of man under sin is much more serious than Keller's presentation would suggest; we do not simply manufacture idols. We are enslaved in a condition of implacable hostility to God. One looks in vain for a robust answer to that condition on the pages of *Counterfeit Gods.*

Sin as Lostness

The lacuna in *Counterfeit Gods* might have been supplied in *The Prodigal God,* since Keller's stated aim in it is 'to lay out the essentials of the Christian message, the gospel'.[27] The title of the book is an interesting twist on the more familiar title of the story in Luke 15 which we know as the Prodigal Son. The more well-known title was designed to draw our attention to the recklessness of the wayward son, but its inadequacy is explained by Keller in two ways: first, that there were two sons in the story, and not just the prodigal one; and second, that the recklessness by which we are struck is that of the father who welcomes the lost son more than that of the son himself.

It might seem like nit-picking to quibble with the title, the justification for which Keller offers in a paragraph in the foreword. On the basis of his definition of 'prodigal' as 'recklessly spendthrift ... to spend until you have nothing left', Keller suggests that what was true of the son in a negative sense became true of the father in a positive sense.[28] But the father, surely, was anything but reckless in his lavish bestowal of gifts on the wayward son; and God is not diminished in his giving his all for us. In my view, it is difficult to justify the use of prodigality as an attribute of God.[29]

From the very outset of the study, Keller rightly draws our attention to the fact that Jesus did not tell his story as an evangelistic tool, but as a polemic and provocative one. It was

easy for the religious leaders of his day—as it is still—to look down on those whose lives were flagrantly immoral. Indeed, the occasion of the three-dimensional parable of Luke 15 was the sneering response of the religious leaders to Jesus: 'this man receives sinners!' (Luke 15:2).

In many ways the force of the story is not so much in the son who left home and who squandered what he had, but in the son who stayed and yet was equally lost. Keller is right when he says that 'Jesus is saying that both the irreligious and the religious are spiritually lost, both life-paths are dead ends, and that every thought the human race has had about how to connect to God has been wrong.'[30]

He is also correct to emphasize that we must not finish the story before Jesus does. To be sure, the return of the wasteful son to his beneficent father is a powerful illustration of the fact that 'God's love and forgiveness can pardon and restore any and every kind of sin or wrongdoing.'[31] But the story continues with the obstinate refusal of the elder brother to make much of his father's generosity.

Keller's interpretation of the elder brother comes in a chapter entitled 'Redefining sin'. He presses the point that both sons were lost, the one by being bad and the other by being good. The son who went on the path of self-discovery, rejecting the strictures of home and family, was evidently lost; it was not so evident in the case of the son who lived the life of moral rectitude and self-satisfaction.

In the case of the elder brother we have what Keller calls 'a much deeper concept of "sin"', going beyond the idea of failing to keep God's rules of conduct.[32] The elder brother had been fastidious in his efforts to keep the father's rules. Yet 'Jesus ... shows us that a man who has violated virtually

nothing on the list of moral misbehaviors can be every bit as spiritually lost as the most profligate, immoral person.'[33] The elder brother could not appreciate that by attempting to place the father in his debt he was 'more distant and alienated from the father than his brother, because he was blind to his true condition'.[34]

This 'elder brother lostness' is deep and damaging. Resentful of others and living a life of 'joyless, fear-based compliance',[35] the elder brother knows nothing of grace. Like all who seek to place God in their debt, he is 'in a prison of their own making'.[36] And at the heart of that problem is a failure 'to repent of the sin under all our other sins and under all our righteousness—the sin of seeking to be our own Savior and Lord'.[37]

The only remedy for such a condition, according to Keller, is that we appreciate the costliness of pardon: 'You need to be moved by the sight of what it cost to bring you home.'[38] In order to demonstrate this, Keller turns a key element of the parable on its head, portraying Jesus as the true elder brother, whose sacrifice on the cross is what alone will change our self-centeredness: 'To the degree we "see his beauty" we will be free from the fear and neediness that creates either younger brothers or elder brothers.'[39]

Keller then emphasizes the festal element of the story. The father threw a party for his wayward son. There was rejoicing and dancing. Keller applies this to the idea that salvation is 'experiential', not abstract: 'If you are filled with shame and guilt you do not merely need to believe in the abstract concept of God's mercy. You must sense, on the palate of the heart, as it were, the sweetness of his mercy. Then you will know you are accepted.'[40] This, more than any theoretical notion of God's

forgiveness, is what will turn our self-reliance to reliance on the mercy of God. It will also, as Keller presses home in the book's concluding chapter, restructure and reorientate our life in radical new ways.

Most reviews of Keller's work have been enthusiastic, and some confidently assert that Keller will have influenced the way in which the parable of the prodigal son will be preached in future.[41] However, at the level of exegesis, Keller's *The Prodigal God* is both helpful and misleading.

Keller is helpful in the emphasis he places on the elder brother of the story. In many ways the elder brother is the key figure, since the three stories were all told by Jesus in response to the graceless and wholly inappropriate attitude of the Pharisees in response to Christ's table fellowship with repentant sinners.

To the extent that Keller has highlighted the gracelessness of the self-righteous in the parable, he has helpfully explained the parable for us. And although it is debatable whether we are required to view the elder brother as actually lost, his discussion of the matter has nonetheless highlighted a much needed emphasis at the present time: that it is as possible to be lost inside the church as outside. Indeed, if the Westminster Confession of Faith is right to say that outside the church there is 'no ordinary possibility of salvation' (WCF 25:2), then to be lost *within* its pale is the greater tragedy.

But where Keller is less than helpful, and, indeed, misleading, is in his over-spiritualizing of other details of the narrative. The discussions, for example, of chapter 6 on 'redefining hope' and of chapter 7 on 'the feast of the Father' tend to exaggerate minor details within the story. Both the home and the feast play important roles in highlighting both the lostness of the

son(s) and the lavish grace of the father, but Keller has tended to give them a disproportionate emphasis which rather distracts from the central and key points of the story.

Indeed, for Keller to deduce from the festal element of the parable the doctrine that 'for Jesus, this material world matters', and to go on to argue for social justice, is highly questionable.[42] What he says is the truth; but it is doubtful that it is the truth taught in the text of Luke 15. In spite of his insistence that 'we can't press every single detail literally', Keller comes close to doing precisely that.[43]

Coupled with this is the introduction into Keller's exposition of the story of Jesus as the better elder brother. Is it the case that 'by putting a flawed elder brother in the story, Jesus is inviting us to imagine and yearn for a true one'?[44] The point of the story is not, surely, that Jesus, our true elder brother, paid the total cost of our pardon. Keller arrives here through a tendentious link to the father's statement to the elder brother in the story that 'all that I have is yours' (Luke 15:31, NKJV), implying that part of the elder brother's estate was used to welcome the younger brother home. The element which binds the three stories of Luke 15 together is the rejoicing over what is lost (Luke 15:7, 10, 32), not the cost of the forgiveness. If that is part of the narrative, it is highlighted in what the Father did, not what Jesus as our true elder brother did.

More fundamental, however, is the notion of sin which Keller 'redefines' (according to the title of chapter 3). The presentation of the elder brother is of one who is morally upright and superior, 'lost, yet who has no sins on the list'.[45] Keller is careful not to give the impression that such a creature actually exists; the only man who ever lived with no sins on the list was Christ himself. The problem lay in the elder brother's self-image,

mirroring the self-righteousness and self-interest of so many of the religious leaders of Jesus' day.

And yet it will not do to suggest that the sin of moralism, any more than the sin of immorality, can be defined without recourse to God's law. After all, the 'immoderate setting of our mind, will or affections upon other things, and taking them off [God] in whole or in part' is among the sins forbidden in the first commandment.[46] The nature of sin is still to be deduced from God's law, and defined as a breach of it, despite the apparent immaculateness of our life.

So when Keller argues that 'sin is not just breaking the rules, it is putting yourself in the place of God as Savior, Lord and Judge', he is rather begging the question.[47] To place oneself in the place of God *is* breaking the rules; the sin of the elder brother is a violation of the law. It is an over-simplification to suggest that 'There are two ways to be your own Savior and Lord. One is by breaking all the moral laws and setting your own course, and one is by keeping all the moral laws and being very, very good.'[48] Even allowing for the rhetorical flourish, the statement is misleading.

Like *Counterfeit Gods*, *The Prodigal God* is an attempt to cross the divide between the ancient text and modern culture. It is a further 'rebranding' of motifs which may well be familiar to frequent and regular readers of the biblical narrative but which make little sense to man in the twenty-first century. Yet where the work falls short is in the lack of reference to God's law as that without which it is impossible to define sin. Immoral living leads to lostness in the same way as moralism does—by a mindset that is not subject to God's law, and cannot be (Rom. 8:7). The gospel offers more than a sight of home; it offers an objective ground of atonement based on the law-keeping of Jesus.

Keller knows this, of course. But it is doubtful whether a reader of *The Prodigal God* would. To be sure, the story of the prodigal son cannot be the basis for an atonement theory, since that is not the question with which it deals. But nor can any treatment of it which attempts to present the gospel simply suggest that 'the basic operating principle of the gospel is "I am accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ—therefore I obey."' To do so is to run the risk of minimizing that very work and, thereby, to minimize the problem with which it deals.

Sin as Self-centeredness

In his work *King's Cross*, Keller takes his readers through the Gospel of Mark. The title captures brilliantly the twin themes of Mark's Gospel: Jesus as the promised King, and Jesus as the crucified Messiah. Keller's purpose, like Mark's, is that his readers 'find the figure of Jesus worthy of your attention'.[49] And in his own remarkable style, Keller shows us the figure of Jesus as Mark portrays him.

From the outset, Keller identifies Jesus' preaching on the coming of the kingdom with the gospel, the good news of salvation. The problem to which the gospel of Christ is the solution is the problem of self-centeredness; that, Keller suggests, is the essence of the story of the fall and the disintegration of man in Genesis 3: 'When we decide to be our own center, our own king, everything falls apart: physically, socially, spiritually and psychologically ... a true king will come back to put everything right and renew the entire world. The good news of the kingdom of God is this: Jesus is that true King.'[50]

King's Cross is an interesting journey through Mark's Gospel, and Keller has some refreshing insights into the Markan narrative.

He also has some interesting perspectives on sin, such as his treatment of the paralyzed man who was brought to Jesus for healing. Keller is exactly right to state that 'Jesus knows something the man doesn't know—that he has a much bigger problem than his physical condition.'[51] That is the problem of sin, concerning which Keller says:

> When the Bible talks about sin it is not just referring to the bad things we do. It's not just lying or lust or whatever the case may be—it is ignoring God in the world he has made; it's rebelling against him by living without reference to him. It's saying, 'I will decide exactly how I live my life.' And Jesus says that is our main problem.[52]

Keller's thesis throughout *King's Cross* is that Jesus saves us by removing that innate self-centeredness. The healing of the paralyzed man demonstrates that true restoration has to be a deep work of grace:

> We need someone who can go deeper ... Someone who will use his claws, lovingly and carefully, to pierce our self-centeredness and remove the sin that enslaves us and distorts even our beautiful longings. In short, we need to be forgiven. That's the only way for our discontent to be healed. It will take more than a miracle worker or a divine genie—it will take a Savior.'[53]

Early in Mark's Gospel, however, we are introduced to the controversy in which Jesus found himself at odds with the religious leaders of his day—the issue of Sabbath-keeping and, therefore, the issue of the whole purpose of the law of God. Keller is right to remind us that the provision of Sabbath rest

in the Mosaic law was a remarkable concession from God—he says, quite memorably, that 'the Sabbath is about restoring the diminished'.[54] The Pharisees and other leaders had become over-concerned about regulating behavior instead of seeing the God-given provision of the Sabbath for what it was.

Keller's explanation of the conflict is to view it in terms of two different paradigms for obeying God's law: religion and gospel. In the former, law-keeping is always burdensome, because religion comes with advice, with a code of conduct, with the logic 'If I perform, if I obey, I'm accepted.'[55] The gospel paradigm comes with news: 'I'm fully accepted in Jesus Christ, and therefore I obey.'[56] Keller's application of this is that for the religious person, the burden is to know exactly what the law requires, and to follow it with detailed observance in order to win God's favor. But for the Christian the law functions differently: knowing that we have been delivered from sin, Keller says, 'God's law takes you out of yourself; it shows you how to serve God and others instead of being absorbed with yourself.'[57]

Keller underscores this by his interpretation of Jesus' claim in Mark 2:28 to be Lord of the Sabbath. For Keller this means that something more than that a regular, weekly, one-day Sabbath is required:

> Jesus means that he is the Sabbath. He is the source of the deep rest we need. He has come to completely change the way we rest. The one-day-a-week rest we take is just a taste of the deep divine rest we need, and Jesus is its source.[58]

More than that, Keller argues that Jesus' assertion to be Lord of the Sabbath is a claim to divinity. That is certainly true; the

claim is nothing if not a self-conscious identification of Jesus with the God who gave the commandment in the first place. One corollary of this is that 'all sins are against him',[59] since he is the 'uncreated, transcendent, eternal Creator'.[60]

But Keller concludes from all of this that 'Because the Lord of the Sabbath said, "It is finished," we can rest from religion—forever.'[61] This conclusion has come too far from the premise that the opposition Jesus faced was from religious leaders. Did Jesus come to abolish religion?

Jesus certainly took issue, not least on the Sabbath question, with those who had turned religion on its head and made it a self-serving, self-righteous enterprise. But this does not mean that he had no interest in institutional religion; there is not a shred of evidence to suggest that true faith and biblical religion are mutually exclusive. Keller has done the church a disservice with the suggestion that faith in Christ is the end of religion. It is actually its beginning.

More serious, in my view, is Keller's exegesis of the Sabbath-fulfillment in Christ. His view is typical of many evangelical theologians for whom the actualization of the fourth commandment in this age of the Spirit is in its spiritualization: Jesus is the Sabbath (so Keller argues), and therefore we sanctify the Sabbath by resting in him.

This position on the fourth commandment has become something of a given in modern evangelicalism. Keller's view is typical of theologians who are reluctant to hold the traditional position that the resurrection of Jesus Christ has altered the Sabbath from the last day of the week to the first, and that by observing a new Sabbath, on each Lord's Day, we bring the Sabbath commandment into its own by our worship, rest and profession of the risen Christ.[62]

It is difficult, however, to justify Keller's position. If the law of God is not entirely abolished (which Keller concedes it cannot be, since the gospel forces us to approach the law with a different paradigm from that of religion), then the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy remains. On Keller's own admission, it must remain as an element which a Christian should 'study and obey ... in order to discover the kind of life you should live in order to please and resemble the one who created and redeemed you'.[63]

The problem, of course, is that spiritualizing the commandment is not obeying it; nor does it exhaust its meaning or relevance. The transition from seventh day of the week Sabbath to first day of the week Lord's Day was a natural one for the church to make in the wake of the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The principles of redemption and grace which the older form of the commandment embodied had come into their own. To be sure, the gospel means nothing if it does not mean resting in Christ. But this hardly exhausts the requirement of a command from God which regulates our week and calls for a day of rest and of worship.

There is no doubt that a legalistic sabbatarian position is as inimical to the gospel now as it was in Jesus' day. But to call Jesus 'Lord' involves conceding the New Testament Sabbath to be under his lordship. What else gave John the apostle the motivation to observe each Lord's Day as a day of worship of his risen Lord (Rev. 1:10)? What could be more fitting for believers in this age of the Spirit than to lay aside their work in order to fulfill their duty of rejoicing in the day that the Lord has made for them? To be sure, there is a glorious anticipation in the weekly, new covenant Sabbath of the rest that waits in glory for the people of God (Heb. 4:9). But the fourth

commandment is not fulfilled or honored by interpreting it in a non-literal way.

Keller takes up his discussion of sin in dealing with the controversy between Jesus and the religious leaders over ceremonial cleanness. He correctly identifies one of the problems of our contemporary society as a problem over the experience of guilt without the explanation of sin: 'We don't believe in sin, and yet we still feel that there's something wrong with us.'[64]

Keller takes Jesus' statement that it is what is within a man that makes him unclean (Mark 7:20–23) as highlighting the fact that 'We are what's wrong. It's what comes out from the inside. It's the self-centeredness of the human heart. It's sin.'[65] With refreshingly evangelical flair, Keller goes on to highlight that the human problem is not something on the outside that can be corrected by morality, politics, culture or religion; the problem is our heart: 'No matter what we do, or how hard we try, external solutions do not deal with the soul.'[66] The priestly activity of Jesus, being made sin for us, is the only remedy for failure and guilt.[67]

Indeed, as Keller discusses the necessity of the atoning death of Christ, we find ourselves on more solid ground. There is, he argues, a legal necessity for the death of Christ, for his having been made sin. There is a penalty to be borne, and a price to be paid. There is retribution which he alone must bear and experience if we are to have peace with God. 'Sin always entails a penalty,' Keller argues. 'Guilt can't be dealt with unless someone pays.'[68]

That is exactly right. Keller cannot adequately explain the atonement without recourse to the guilt that sin brings; and he knows that that guilt cannot be explained without reference

to the law. The weakness in his discussion is that the categories of law by which he explains Jesus' death, and his being made sin for us, are not the categories by which he explains our own native guilt and sin. Our derangement is not merely our self-centeredness; it is our law-breaking. We have contracted guilt in the same way as Christ must atone for it: through the curse of a broken law. That emphasis, prominent in Keller's treatment of the atonement, is lacking in his discussions on the nature and consequences of sin.

The overarching concept of sin in *King's Cross* as self-centeredness is one to which Keller returns in his discussion of Mark's treatment of the cross. There is a darkness which engulfs the world as Jesus dies at Calvary. Keller explains this in terms of isolation and loss of identity: 'If you center on anything but God, you will suffer a loss of identity ... you don't really know who you are. In the darkness you can't see yourself.'[69] To be estranged from God is to be orbiting around something other than God, and to be 'on a trajectory toward a life of disintegration'.[70]

Keller has some moving insights into the reason Jesus was plunged into darkness in his death, that we might experience the light of God's truth and blessing. 'His was perfect obedience in our place.'[71] But this begs the question. In place of what? In place of our disobedience, surely. The gospel that focuses on Calvary is the solution to the objective problem of disobedience, not merely the subjective problem of self-centeredness.

Keller knows this, and he often uses the language of substitution as he references the work of Christ on the cross.[72] He describes the death of Jesus in his chapter on 'The Cup' in these terms: 'On the cross Jesus got what we deserved: the sin, guilt and

brokenness of the world fell upon him. He loved us so much he took divine justice on himself so that we could be passed over, forever.'[73] But again, the problem is in the rebranding; the agonies of the cross require a deeper, more forensic explanation than Keller provides. Sin as self-centeredness is a *symptom* of, not a reason for, our condition. The paradigm of Scripture is that we are fallen by nature, and lie under the curse of a broken covenant and the penalty of a broken law. This, however, is not a theme prominent in Keller's writings.

Sin and Culture

Keller is aware of two things: first, that the gospel is the only remedy for man's condition; and secondly, that the church can only preach that gospel in the culture within which it finds itself. Redeemer Presbyterian Church is committed to societal transformation through the application of these two core principles, as is stated in the church's vision statement: 'To build a great city for all people through a gospel movement that brings personal conversion, community formation, social justice and cultural renewal to New York City and, through it, to the world.'[74]

Keller's writings reflect these emphases. The work of Jesus Christ, dying on the cross, rising from the dead and ascending to heaven, undergirds the presentation of the good news of the gospel in Keller's literature: 'The bondage of sin is broken', he writes in the workbook *Gospel in Life*, 'when we come out from under the law—when we begin to believe the gospel of Christ's-work-salvation.'[75] But only in *King's Cross* is any extended treatment given to what Christ's work for us was; passing references in his other books tend to refer to it rather tendentiously, with the summary statement recurring more

than once that the gospel operates on the principle that 'I am accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ.'

On the other hand, his writings are replete with cultural references, in which Keller does two things. First, he shows us his wide-ranging grasp of cultural media and the spiritual values they express. He does not do this to display his knowledge, but to trawl contemporary culture to expose its emptiness, much as Solomon did in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Second, he is making connections with those for whom knowledge of contemporary cinema, for example, is not only more attractive, but more life-transforming than knowledge of Scripture. He knows that bridges are built to connect particular points and, as a contemporary apologist, he wants to build a bridge between the timeless message of the church and the time-bound situation of contemporary culture.

To do this, he has attempted to redefine, in meaningful terms, the basic need of the human heart. The burden of this chapter has been that the trade-off between holding on to a biblical doctrine of sin and rebranding the concept to make it attractive to the modern sinner has resulted in a loss of substantive meaning. Symptoms have been marketed as causes, and basic biblical categories for sin, not least the emphasis on sin as the breaking of God's law, and fallenness in Adam as the primary condition of our lives, have rarely been highlighted in Keller's writings at all.

The attempt to define biblical concepts in culturally-sensitive categories is a difficult one. Keller himself is not unaware of the difficulty. He writes:

> Depicting sin as an act of misplaced love, not just a violation of law, is more compelling to many people in our culture today.

> Of course, a complete biblical description of sin and grace must recognize our rebellion against the authority of God's law.[76]

It is that 'of course' that opens the door to confusion and uncertainty. Where does the culturally compelling theology find that 'of course'? When we have rebranded our foundational doctrines in a manner that is persuasive and irresistible to our culture, how do we then bring the 'complete biblical description' to that culture? This, ultimately, is where Keller's rebranding leads—to an attempt to define sin not in terms of what it does to God, in robbing him of his glory, but of what it does to us, in robbing us of our wholeness. And as a consequence, it is difficult to know whether some things are sins some of the time, or all of the time. Some websites, for example, have highlighted Keller's ambiguity, wariness and discomfort over identifying homosexual practice as sinful.[77]

And it has profound implications for our missiology, too. Are we to rebrand the biblical doctrine of sin afresh in every cultural engagement? One recent review of *Center Church* urges the reader to 'go and construct your own theological vision for the place and time that God has put you in his redemptive purposes'.[78] That is an approach remarkably similar to the 'emergent church' position.

We can all learn from Keller's approach. I am grateful for the constant reminder in his writings that moralizing can be just as sinful as immorality, and that sin is a multiplex and multi-faceted reality. But unless I am on firm ground in my definitions, I will mislead in my presentation of the gospel. Ultimately, the gospel is not about me at all. It is certainly *for* me, but it is *about* the God whom I have offended, and about the Christ whom he punished in my place. The offense? That

I have broken his holy law, and break it constantly, of which my idolatry, and lostness and self-centeredness are symptoms. The remedy? That it is possible for the perfect law-keeping life and penalty-bearing death of another to restore my relationship with God.

Much as I admire, and learn from, Keller's efforts to make these truths known to contemporary society, I fear that these foundational truths of the biblical gospel have been obscured in the rebranding. Indeed, I wonder about the extent to which a rebranding is necessary at all.

In an article on the nature of the gospel, D. A. Carson reminds us that an appreciation of the nature of the gospel of free grace in Christ requires a full-orbed view of sin:

> ... we gain clarity regarding the gospel when we discern what the gospel addresses, what it fixes. If we focus on just one element of the desperate need—say our broken horizontal relationships—then by ignoring all the other dimensions of our sin, including the most fundamental dimension, namely, our rebellion against God and the consequent wrath we have rightly incurred, we may marginalize or even abandon crucial elements of the gospel that address our sin. After all, the Bible speaks of the wrath of God more than six hundred times. If we cannot grasp how the gospel of Jesus Christ addresses all these dimensions of our desperate need, we will invariably promulgate an anemic and truncated gospel.[79]

It is to be feared that Keller's attempt at rebranding the biblical doctrine of sin, highlighting as it does some key elements while obscuring others, leads to just such a truncating of the gospel.

Endnotes

1. Rick Phillips, 'Tim Keller's Review of Willow Creek: What About Gospel Clarity?', http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2009/10/tim-kellers-review-of-willow-c.php, October 2, 2009 (accessed 11 May 2011). The phrase 'Young, Restless and Reformed' is from Colin Hansen's book of the same title (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008).
2. Quoted in Cathy L Grossman, 'Has the notion of "sin" been lost?', http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2008–03–19-sin_N.htm, 3/19/2008 (accessed 11 May 2011).
3. *Center Church*, pp. 126–27.
4. *Center Church*, p. 127.
5. *Reason for God*, pp. xii–xiii.
6. *Reason for God*, p. 159.
7. *Reason for God*, p. 161.
8. *Reason for God*, p. 162.
9. *Reason for God*, p. 162.
10. *Reason for God*, p. 169.
11. *Reason for God*, p. xix.
12. *Reason for God*, p. 114.
13. All Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.
14. *Reason for God*, p. 193.
15. *Counterfeit Gods*, p. 146.
16. *Counterfeit Gods*, p. 149.
17. *Counterfeit Gods*, p. 165.
18. *Counterfeit Gods*, p. 165.
19. *Counterfeit Gods*, p. 166.
20. *Counterfeit Gods*, p. 172.
21. *Counterfeit Gods*, p. 175.
22. *Center Church*, p. 127.
23. This is in spite of Keller's attempt to marry his rebranding to Paul's doctrine of justification by faith (*Center Church*, p. 128).
24. *Counterfeit Gods*, pp. 172, 174.
25. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), vol. 1, 1.11.8, p. 108.
26. Douglas Vickers, *The Fracture of Faith: Recovering Belief of the Gospel in a Postmodern World* (Tain: Mentor, 2005), p. 91.
27. *Prodigal God*, p. xi.
28. *Prodigal God*, pp. xiv–xv.
29. See also William M. Schweitzer, 'Review of The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Gospel and Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power and the Only Hope That Matters, by Timothy Keller' (Westminster Theological Journal 72, no. 2, 2010), pp. 444–47.
30. *Prodigal God*, pp. 10–11.
31. *Prodigal God*, p. 24.
32. *Prodigal God*, p. 37.
33. *Prodigal God*, p. 43.

34. *Prodigal God*, p. 47.
35. *Prodigal God*, p. 57.
36. *Prodigal God*, p. 57.
37. *Prodigal God*, p. 78.
38. *Prodigal God*, p. 86.
39. *Prodigal God*, p. 89.
40. *Prodigal God*, pp. 108–9.
41. One blogger states: 'I fully expect this book to set a new trend in the way the parable of the prodigal son is preached in churches everywhere' (http://www.wordandspirit.co.uk/blog/2009/03/08/book-review-the-prodigal-god-tim-keller/, accessed 5 July 2011).
42. *Prodigal God*, p. 110.
43. *Prodigal God*, p. 76.
44. *Prodigal God*, p. 84.
45. *Prodigal God*, p. 76.
46. The quotation is from the Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC), Question 105.
47. *Prodigal God*, p. 43.
48. *Prodigal God*, p. 44.
49. *King's Cross*, p. xv.
50. *King's Cross*, p. 16.
51. *King's Cross*, p. 27.
52. *King's Cross*, p. 28.
53. *King's Cross*, p. 35.
54. *King's Cross*, p. 38.
55. *King's Cross*, p. 39.
56. *King's Cross*, p. 39.
57. *King's Cross*, p. 41.
58. *King's Cross*, p. 42.
59. *King's Cross*, p. 44.
60. *King's Cross*, p. 44.
61. *King's Cross*, p. 47.
62. See the collection of essays in D.A. Carson (ed.), *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982, and J.M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Leicester: IVP, 1986), esp. pp. 234–5.
63. *King's Cross*, p. 41.
64. *King's Cross*, p. 73.
65. *King's Cross*, p. 75.
66. *King's Cross*, p. 76.
67. *King's Cross*, p. 84.
68. *King's Cross*, p. 101.
69. *King's Cross*, p. 204.
70. *King's Cross*, p. 205.
71. *King's Cross*, p. 209.
72. 'Jesus' words [in Mark 14:23–25] mean that as a result of his substitutionary sacrifice there is now a new covenant between God and us', *King's Cross*, p. 166.
73. *King's Cross*, p. 168.

74. http://redeemer.com/about_us/vision_and_values (accessed 17 February 2012).
75. Timothy Keller, *Gospel in Life: Grace Changes Everything* Study Guide, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010, p. 46.
76. *Center Church*, p. 128.
77. See, for example, the transcript of Tim Keller's interview at Covenant Theological Seminary (with access to the original recording) at http://www.baylyblog.com/2010/04/tim-keller-on-sexuality-again.html (accessed 17 February 2010).
78. Mark Pickett, review of *Center Church* in *Foundations* No. 64, Spring 2013, at http://www.affinity.org.uk/foundations-issues/issue-64-article-5---review-article-constructing-theological-vision (accessed 28 May 2013).
79. D.A. Carson, 'What is the Gospel?—Revisited' in S.Storms and J.Taylor (eds), *For the Fame of God's Name: Essays in Honor of John Piper* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), p. 170.

'Brimstone-Free' Hell: a new way of saying the same old thing about judgment and hell?[1]

William M. Schweitzer

I. Introduction

Tim Keller is right to preach the importance of the doctrines of judgment and hell.[2] While we must always contend for the faith generally (Jude 1:3), these interrelated doctrines in particular serve as a theological 'canary in the mineshaft'—when orthodoxy deteriorates, they tend to be among the first to die.[3] Beyond the familiar historical instances that might be cited as demonstrative of this function, it is not terribly difficult to see why it would be the case theoretically.[4] If the prevailing cultural winds are blowing in the direction of absolute human autonomy, then there could hardly be anything more abhorrent to this culture than a future judgment in which the sovereign Lord will condemn sinners to everlasting torment. Or as Dr. Keller puts it in *The Reason for God*, 'In our culture, divine judgment is one of Christianity's most offensive doctrines.'[5]

So he is absolutely right to take a stand on this issue. If we manage to keep this 'canary' alive, there is some hope that we are also preserving the basic theological integrity of the church.

Although this essay will question aspects of Keller's teaching on hell, we should make clear the important difference between his sincere efforts and those who have given up the fight. Rob Bell is an infamous recent example of an evangelical leader who wants to be known as orthodox but who has simply capitulated to universalistic conclusions.[6] For every Bell, however, there are probably a hundred less daring souls who express their doubt concerning the doctrines of judgment and hell simply by not speaking on these things at all. Dr. Keller simply could not be put in either of these categories. Hell is routinely included when Keller articulates the Christian faith in print, and it features among the topics preached at his church.[7] Indeed, he devotes an entire message to the very 'Importance of Hell'.[8] Keller reasons in this message, 'If Jesus, the Lord of Love and Author of Grace spoke about hell more often, and in a more vivid, blood-curdling manner than anyone else, it must be a crucial truth.'[9] Amen and amen.

So what, then, might be questionable? Keller has two different ways of communicating the doctrine of hell, one for 'traditionalists' and the other for 'postmoderns'.[10] Now this contextual approach itself raises a whole host of issues regarding anthropology, effectual calling, and the means of grace.[11] Assuming for the moment that there is nothing wrong with this contextual approach, however, we still ask whether both of Keller's messages are good representations of the biblical doctrines of judgment and hell. Aside from a quibble, Keller's teaching for the traditionalists seems consistent with the traditional doctrine.[12] The real questions come regarding the message for the

postmoderns. On this point, Keller takes his cues from one of his favorite Christian thinkers, a man to whom he is frequently compared—C. S. Lewis.[13] No doubt Lewis's concept presents a powerful apologetic strategy; after all, how many people are going to be offended by a hell that God does not send anyone to, where the punishment is self-inflicted, and from which no one ever asks to leave? However, one wonders whether this depiction is altogether a consistent communication of the biblical doctrines of judgment and hell, and this consideration is the subject of this essay. In addition, since Keller has another favorite Christian thinker who is well known for his work in this area of theology, we shall also consider what support Jonathan Edwards might or might not possibly lend for this teaching. First, a preliminary word about the nature of doctrine.

Doctrine: Name and Content

Doctrines have names such as 'justification' to describe what they teach, but these do not remain as empty shells eligible to be filled with just any content. Rather, the name must go along with all the constituent parts of the orthodox doctrine. In the case of the teaching we are discussing here, let us imagine that the requisite elements of the doctrines of judgment and hell were simply that a) hell is unpleasant, and b) people inevitably stay there forever. If so, we would have an enormous degree of flexibility in the way we might communicate such a doctrine. We might, for instance, say that hell's unpleasantness consists chiefly in its terribly unfashionable uniforms, and that people choose to stay there because they are too embarrassed to leave. Our minimal elements would hypothetically have been upheld, yet it is clear that truth would have been obliterated.

More to the point, the words 'judgment' and 'hell' indicate

sets of specific doctrinal content that must be conserved in our formulations. This applies not only to systematic theologies, where doctrine is explained at length, but also to popular and apologetic works. Even if such occasions do not permit us to completely explain every last element of a given doctrine, what we do say must be consistent with the fuller explication. After all, what would be the use of rendering a doctrine acceptable by altering its content when the person thus convinced will soon enough encounter the 'real' doctrine, which would remain just as offensive as ever?

With these things in mind, we shall consider three specific points of the biblical doctrines of judgment and hell: that God himself sends people to hell, that God himself keeps people in hell eternally, and that punishment in hell is meted out by God himself. At each point, we shall compare these elements of the biblical teaching with representative statements of Keller's teaching for postmoderns. Our first interpretive question is, Who condemns people to hell?

Who Condemns People to Hell?

Who condemns people to hell? The Bible would seem to be clear on this matter: God does, through Christ.[14] The heavens declare that 'God himself is judge!' (Ps 50:6).[15] God proclaims himself to be sovereign over the destiny of all mankind, and specifically to be the Judge of the wicked.[16] God's judicial office is included in the list of divine attributes in the Westminster Confession (WCF 2:1). The news that Christ has been appointed to carry out this office forms part of the apostolic message in Acts 10:42: 'And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead.'[17] Christ's

coming judgment then features in the Mars Hill discourse, where Paul speaks of it as one of the great truths verified by the resurrection: '[God] has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead' (Acts 17:31).

Furthermore, God has seen fit to provide us with a preview of Christ's condemnation of the wicked on Judgment Day. He will say to the goats, 'Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels'; and likewise to the hypocrites, 'Depart from me, all you workers of evil!' (Matt. 25:41; Luke 13:27). It is for this reason that Jesus solemnly warns us, 'fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell' (Luke 12:5). It would seem difficult to miss the point that is so clear in these texts: God, in the Person of Christ, is the One who sends people to hell.

That point is not so clear, however, in Keller's teaching for postmoderns. Keller begins his discussion in *Reason for God* in this way:

> Modern people inevitably think that hell works like this: God gives us time, but if we haven't made the right choices by the end of our lives, he casts our souls into hell for all eternity. As the poor souls fall though space, they cry out for mercy, but God says 'Too late! You had your chance! Now you will suffer!' This caricature misunderstands the very nature of evil. The Biblical picture is that sin separates us from the presence of God, which is the source of all joy and indeed of all love, wisdom, or good things of any sort. Since we were originally created for God's immediate presence, only before his face will we thrive, flourish, and achieve our highest potential. If we were to lose

> his presence totally, that would be hell—the loss of our capability for giving or receiving love or joy.[18]

This is a curious statement. The 'caricature' here is the idea of a God who, at a definite point in the future, condemns sinners to eternal hell regardless of all their pleas for mercy. The objection is obviously painted in colors sympathetic to the objector's point of view; yet even so, this 'caricature' is essentially indistinguishable from the orthodox truth. When Christ himself explains what will happen on that Day, not only does he make it abundantly clear who is doing the condemning, he betrays no embarrassment at the damned pleading for reconsideration: 'On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?"' Notwithstanding such pleas, the Lord replies, 'And then will I declare to them, "I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness"' (Matt. 7:22–23). Moreover, we have Christ's warning to the Pharisees, 'You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell?' (Matt. 23:33). 'Caricature' or not, God certainly does cast sinners into hell against their will.

Returning to Keller's doctrine for postmoderns, we move on to ask, who sends people to hell if not God? The answer seems to be, no one sends anyone else to hell *per se*; people send themselves to hell. In a sermon bearing the provocative title 'Isn't the God of Christianity an Angry Judge?', Keller examines 'the Christian teaching that God is a judge, and a judge who consigns people to hell'.[19] The sermon builds a consistent case that we send ourselves to hell apart from any judicial condemnation by God:

> Summary: hell is just a freely chosen identity based on something else besides God going on forever ... And that's the reason why the idea, that you might have in your mind, and that people give you in your mind, that God is a God who sort of throws people into hell, you know he sort of throws them into this pit, and they're climbing up the sides, saying, 'Please no, let me out!' and God is saying, 'No! It's too late now; it's hell for you!' C. S. Lewis puts it like this, he says: 'In the long run, the answer to those who object to the doctrine of hell is itself a question: what are you asking God to do? To wipe out past sins, and at all costs give them a fresh start? He did, on Calvary. To forgive them? But they don't ask for forgiveness. *To leave them alone?* That's what hell is. There are only two kinds of people in the end. Those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, '*Thy* will be done.' All that are in hell, choose it. Without that self-choice, it wouldn't be hell.[20]

There are two sides to the coin of self-chosen hell. One side is that God does not condemn people to hell, and the other is that people send themselves. Notice that Keller appears to affirm both sides of the coin. It is difficult to see how this is compatible with the biblical teaching that God is the One who condemns sinners to hell, summarized in the Westminster Larger Catechism: 'At the day of judgment, the wicked shall be set on Christ's left hand, and, upon clear evidence, and full conviction of their own consciences, shall have the fearful but just sentence of condemnation pronounced against them ...' (WLC 89).

Keller would respond to our questions on this point by saying that there must be some way in which hell is self-chosen. It is true, for instance, that people know deep down that judgment

is coming and yet choose to continue in sin (Rom 1:18–32). In that limited sense I suppose you could say that hell is self-chosen; but to say so without extensive qualification would be misleading. It would be akin to saying, 'All that are in jail, choose it. Without that self-choice, it wouldn't be jail.' With some exceptions due to the unprecedented levels of creature comfort found in contemporary prisons, criminals do not willingly give up their liberty to be locked up in jail. Given a choice between the two, they tend to evade arrest, employ skilled lawyers to thwart prosecution, enter into plea bargains to reduce the judge's sentence, and ask for parole as soon as possible. That is because criminals choose the pleasures and rewards of their lawbreaking, *not* the jail term that is the unpleasant consequence imposed involuntarily by the state. Likewise, sinners choose their sin, not the God-imposed consequence of hell itself.

Moreover, to say that hell is self-chosen without making it clear that this choice is fully subordinate to God's sovereignty would also be misleading. Consider the parallel case of how we explain salvation. We could say, 'All who are in heaven choose it,' and we would have better biblical grounds. Yet we have a word for a theology that emphasizes the self-chosen aspect of salvation to the exclusion or subordination of God's sovereignty. We call it Arminianism. It is a debatable point whether the Bible teaches that hell is in any proper sense self-chosen; but even if it did, to speak only of this aspect would be a distortion inconsistent with the faith that teaches that God 'hath most sovereign dominion over [all people], to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever himself pleaseth' (WCF 2:2).

This being the case, it is a bit surprising to read statements in Keller such as the following:

> That is why it is a travesty to picture God casting people into a pit who are crying 'I'm sorry! Let me out!' The people on the bus from hell in Lewis's parable would rather have their 'freedom,' as they define it, than salvation. Their delusion is that, if they glorified God, they would somehow lose power and freedom, but in a supreme and tragic irony, their choice has ruined their own potential for greatness. Hell is, as Lewis says, 'the greatest monument to human freedom.' As Romans 1:24 says, God 'gave them up to ... their desires.' All God does in the end with people is give them what they most want, including freedom from himself. What could be more fair than that?[21]

I am unsure why Keller would so condemn a picture that—unsympathetic colors notwithstanding—is consonant with the orthodox doctrine of divine judgment. It is one thing to want to find new ways to explain the traditional doctrine; it is quite another to label it a 'travesty'. Moreover, the reference to Romans 1:24 is more specious than solid. Romans 1 is concerned with the limited foretaste of wrath that is experienced in this present world, not hell. We soon enough come to the subject of eternal judgment and hell in Romans 2, and here the picture is altogether traditional: 'you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who "will render to each one according to his deeds": [...] indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish, on every soul of man who does evil ...' (Rom. 2:5–9, NKJV). Far from warranting statements such as that hell is 'the greatest monument to human freedom', or that 'God simply gives people what they most want', the relevant passage in the book of Romans expresses precisely the opposite sentiment:

> You will say to me then, 'Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?' But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, 'Why have you made me like this?' Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honored use and another for dishonorable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction ... (Rom. 9:19–22).

God's unconditional sovereignty, concerning both the elect and the reprobate, permeates the Bible. We imagine that Keller would like to bring his audience to the Reformed position, but one wonders how sound a foundation he lays for it when he speaks as if hell is a matter of God simply deferring to human free will.

Who Decides that the Damned Stay in Hell?

Our second question is, Who decides that the damned stay in hell? This seems a useful question to ask because Keller's depiction of God's deference to human decision extends beyond the initial condemnation to hell. It also includes the damned's ongoing determination to *remain* in hell: 'In eternity ... [t]here is increasing isolation, denial, delusion, and self-absorption. When you lose all humility you are out of touch with reality. No one ever asks to leave hell. The very idea of heaven seems to them a sham.'[22] This is another curious statement. We have heard Christ explain that there will be many pleading with him to be admitted into heaven and to be spared from hell before they have actually been condemned (Matt. 7:21–22). Why would we suppose that this inclination would be reversed *after* they have experienced for themselves the unimaginable horrors of hell?

Keller finds exegetical support for his claim in the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. His questionable handling of this text is dealt with at length elsewhere in this book.[23] However, let us just summarize the main problems that Holst identifies with Keller's exegesis. First, Keller's reliance upon a parable for his main support violates the principle that clearer Scripture ought to interpret the less clear.[24] Second, the fact that a character in a parable does not actually ask to leave hell does not constitute sufficient warrant for Keller's idiosyncratic assertion 'No one ever asks to leave hell.' Third, Keller does not give sufficient weight to the fixed chasm (Luke 16:26) being an externally-imposed barrier preventing any movement in or out of hell *irrespective of human choice*. In other words, the God who decides to send people to hell also determines that they must stay there eternally.[25]

This conclusion is precisely in harmony with the statement we have already seen in Matthew: 'Then he [Christ] will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels"' (Matt. 25:41). Hell is defined not merely as fire but as '*eternal* fire'. Eternality is as much an integral part of the sentence as the fire itself, from the very moment of condemnation. Indeed, the force of the repeated statement in Mark 9 is not the simple presence of fire, but that this will be a place where '... the fire is not quenched' (Mark 9:48). God is the One who decides that the damned remain forever in hell, and his edict is known at the very outset of condemnation.

Who Metes out the Punishment in Hell?

Our third question is, Who metes out the punishment in hell? Since we know that God never changes (Mal. 3:6), we might

begin by considering the prototypes of judgment of which we already have a record. Indeed, the worldwide flood of Noah's day, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the exodus all serve as 'an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly' (2 Peter 2:4–6; Jude 1:5). These prototypes of judgment vary greatly in detail, but in each case it is made explicitly clear that God himself metes out the punishment associated with judgment.

We consider first the great flood. The LORD proclaims that he is the one who will bring about this worldwide destruction:

> And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence through them. Behold, I will destroy them with the earth ... For behold, I will bring a flood of waters upon the earth to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life under heaven. Everything that is on the earth shall die ... For in seven days I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground' (Gen. 6:13, 17; 7:4).

Notice that the initiative to punish, the choice of means to punish, and the execution of that punishment all belong to the Lord himself.

There are similar themes in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The angels warn Lot that 'we are about to destroy this place' and explain, 'the LORD has sent us to destroy it'. Lot, on the other hand, simply tells his sons-in-law 'the LORD is about to destroy the city'; but these statements all amount to the same thing (Gen. 19:13–14). When the event itself is described, Scripture points to both the means and the one who

is making use of them: 'Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven. And he overthrew those cities, and all the valley, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground' (Gen. 19:24–25). Once again, the initiative, the choice of means, and the execution are all manifestly of God.

Throughout the exodus, the great emphasis is on the public recognition that it is the LORD God of Israel who is personally executing judgment.[26] He says to Pharaoh, 'I will send all my plagues on you yourself, and on your servants and your people, so that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth' (Exod. 9:14). He explains his actions in the death of the firstborn: 'I will pass through the land of Egypt that night, and I will strike all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and on all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the LORD' (Exod. 12:12). Likewise, 'the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen' (Exod. 14:18). God's glory in personally meting out punishment upon Egypt was not merely incidental to his glory in personally saving his covenant people. Both are fully integral because, in the final analysis, God's salvation cannot be extricated from God's judgment.

Moreover, God's actions in inflicting punishment became the specific object of mandatory commemoration. Moses was divinely instructed to tell his descendants 'how I have dealt harshly with the Egyptians and what signs I have done among them, that you may know that I am the LORD' (Exod. 10:2). The Passover is, among other things, a memorial to God's very personal judgment upon Egypt: 'By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt ... For when Pharaoh stubbornly

refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt' (Exod. 13:14–15).

The story of the desert wanderings is also one of personal judgments against unbelievers, epitomized by the incident of Korah. God first sets up a Mount Carmel-like demonstration for the leaders of the rebellion (Num. 16:28–32). He then deals with the men who had joined in with them, 'And fire came out from the LORD and consumed the 250 men ...' (Num. 16:35). Finally, the sympathizers are likewise dealt with in highly personal terms: 'wrath has gone out from the LORD; the plague has begun' (Num. 16:46). To summarize, if the Lord ever judged in a way that did *not* manifest his direct, personal involvement, it would constitute a radical departure from his methods thus far.

With this background in mind, we consider some representative material that speaks of the future judgment and hell. We find that the eschatological antitype is fully consistent with the foreshadowing types—God himself will mete out the punishment. John the Baptist says of Christ, 'He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire' (Luke 3:16–17). The Lord's direct activity is likewise emphasized in the warning of Matthew 10:28: 'And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.' Unless we mistake this verse to teach annihilationism, the whole point is that we should fear the God who will mete out ongoing, everlasting destruction upon both body and soul in hell.

The Lord will make use of means such as angels to carry out his judgment, but they act at his express command: 'The Son

of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth' (Matt. 13:40–42). This intermingling of Christ's personal work and his direction of angelic activity in judgment is entirely consonant with the doctrine of God's sovereignty. If people are suffering in hell, it is because God has somehow sent them there and has determined that they will suffer. Indeed, God determines even the precise degree to which they will suffer, some more than others.[27]

It is the persistent message of Scripture that God will personally mete out his wrath on rebellious mankind. The writer of Hebrews gathers a couple of the relevant texts together—'Vengeance is mine; I will repay' and 'The Lord will judge his people'—to make the point that 'It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God' (Heb. 10:30–31). Paul emphasizes the personal role of Christ: '... when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus' (2 Thess. 1:7–8). And of course, a number of passages in the Book of Revelation point to how God will pour out his wrath on sinful mankind in the judgment to come.[28] At length, one begins to wonder if there is any truth that is taught more clearly in Scripture.

This message is not quite so clear, however, in Keller's teaching on hell for postmoderns. Following Lewis, Keller suggests in *The Reason for God* that the punishment in hell is just the inevitable outworking of our own refusal to let go of sin:

> In his fantasy *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis describes a busload of people from hell who come to the outskirts of heaven. There

> they are urged to leave behind the sins that have trapped them in hell—but they refuse. Lewis's descriptions of these people are striking because we recognize in them the self-delusion and self-absorption that are 'writ small' in our own addictions. [quotes from Lewis' *Great Divorce*] The people in hell are miserable, but Lewis shows us why. We see raging like unchecked flames their pride, their paranoia, their self-pity, their certainty that everyone else is wrong, that everyone else is an idiot! All their humility is gone, and thus so is their sanity. They are utterly, finally locked in a prison of their own self-centeredness, and their pride progressively expands into a bigger and bigger mushroom cloud. They continue to go to pieces forever, blaming everyone but themselves. Hell is that, writ large.[29]

Keller's explanation for why the damned are miserable does not seem to have all that much in common with the message we have just seen in Scripture.[30] Instead of making it reasonably clear that God will mete out the punishment, we have a description that sounds as if he were not involved at all.

The misery in Keller's hell seems rather to originate from the damned themselves, in the form of psychological self-torment. Yes, the people in hell are miserable, 'but Lewis shows us why'; not because the wrath of God is being poured out upon them in hell fire, but because their own pride, paranoia, and self-pity are 'raging like unchecked flames'. Now Keller is exegeting C. S. Lewis at this point rather than Scripture, but nonetheless it would be reasonable to suppose that there will be some sort of psychological self-torment in hell. However, this will surely be a *response* to the external reality of divine punishment, rather than the substance of the punishment itself.

When Keller is speaking to fellow preachers on the subject, he explains the nature of hell in similar ways:

> C. S. Lewis's depictions of hell are important for postmodern people. In *The Great Divorce,* Lewis describes a busload of people from hell who come to the outskirts of heaven. There they are urged to leave behind the sins that have trapped them in hell. The descriptions Lewis makes of people in hell are so striking because we recognize the denial and self-delusion of substance addictions. When addicted to alcohol, we are miserable, but we blame others and pity ourselves; we do not take responsibility for our behavior or see the roots of our problem. [quotes from Lewis' *Mere Christianity*] Modern people struggle with the idea of God's thinking up punishments to inflict on disobedient people. When sin is seen as slavery and hell as the freely chosen, eternal skid row of the universe, hell becomes much more comprehensible.[31]

Keller implies that we might want to shy away from an idea 'modern people struggle with', which is that God 'thinks up punishments to inflict on disobedient people'. Instead of such things, it is advisable to preach hell as 'the freely chosen, eternal skid row of the universe'.[32] Such a move would admittedly render the doctrine of hell much more 'comprehensible' to contemporary people, but does it remain recognizable as the biblical teaching?

Consider how Keller explains sin and its eternal consequences in one of his latest books, *King's Cross*:

> Sinful behavior (the reference to the hand and foot) and sinful desires (the reference to the eye) are like a fire that has broken

> out in your living room ... Fire is never satisfied. It can't be allowed to smolder; it can't be confined to a corner. It will overtake you eventually. Sin is the same way: It never stays in its place. It always leads to separation from God, which results in intense suffering, first in this life and then in the next. The Bible calls that hell.[33]

Once again, Keller seems to depict sin as something that inevitably leads to negative consequences without reference to God's personal role in judicial sentencing or inflicting wrath. Yet this personal involvement seems to be precisely the element that God wants the world to recognize: 'all the nations shall see my judgment that I have executed, and my hand that I have laid on them' (Ezek. 39:21).

Keller also claims that the Bible essentially equates 'separation from God' with hell.[34] Is there not some truth in this? After all, the NIV says 'They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power' (2 Thess. 1:9). And does not even WLC 29 say that the punishments of sin in the world to come include 'separation' from the 'presence of God'?

First, the words 'and shut out from' in the NIV's rendering of 2 Thessalonians 1:9 is an over-translation of the common Greek word *apo*. The basic gloss for *apo* is 'from', and its semantic range would include origin ('from') as well as opposition ('away from'). Thus the simple meaning of the verse is better captured by the NKJV: 'These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power'. This indeed is the reading incorporated into the Confession itself, as it is found in the Authorized Version.[35]

More importantly, we have the unambiguous statement in Revelation 14 which sheds additional light on the matter:

> If anyone worships the beast and its image and receives a mark on his forehead or on his hand, he also will drink the wine of God's wrath, poured full strength into the cup of his anger, and he will be tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb. And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night, these worshipers of the beast and its image, and whoever receives the mark of its name (Rev 14:9–11).

Those who worship the beast will be 'tormented with fire and sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and *in the presence of the Lamb*'. I suppose one could elude this by dividing the reprobate into a) the beast worshipers, who are punished in the presence of Christ and b) the other sinners, who are punished away from God's presence. However, in addition to various other difficulties, keep in mind that Keller thinks the most awful situation imaginable is to lose the presence of God.[36] If that is the case, why should the beast worshipers receive more favorable treatment than other sinners? Rather, it seems clear that there is only one class of reprobate, all of whom are punished in the most awful situation that God can imagine—the wrathful presence of his Son.

In the case of WLC 29, here is the whole text: 'The punishments of sin in the world to come, are everlasting separation from the comfortable presence of God, and most grievous torments in soul and body, without intermission, in hell-fire for ever'. The key term here is '*comfortable* presence'. God is of course present everywhere, but not in the same way. Heaven or hell

could well be defined, not in terms of the mere presence or absence of God, but in terms of the wrathful or the beneficent presence of God. Thus we understand WLC 89: 'At the day of judgment, the wicked ... shall be cast out from the *favorable presence* of God, and the glorious fellowship with Christ, his saints, and all his holy angels, into hell, to be punished with unspeakable torments, both of body and soul, with the devil and his angels for ever.

Finally we might just note that J. I. Packer, who mainly supports Keller's view regarding the self-chosen nature of hell,[37] stands quite firmly against the idea of hell being the mere absence of God:

> The concept of hell is of a negative relationship to God, an experience not of his absence so much as of his presence in wrath and displeasure. The experience of God's anger as a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29), his righteous condemnation for defying him and clinging to the sins he loathes, and the deprivation of all that is valuable, pleasant, and worthwhile will be the shape of the experience of hell (Rom. 2:6, 8–9, 12).[38]

We could only concur. The terribleness of hell is not the absence of God. It is rather the awful, wrathful presence of God.

In what way did Jonathan Edwards think that hell fire was symbolic?

Keller states that 'virtually all commentators and theologians' agree that 'the Biblical images of fire and outer darkness are metaphorical ... even Jonathan Edwards pointed out that the Biblical language for hell was symbolic'.[39] Keller explains what he means in these words:

> To say that the Scriptural image of hell-fire is not wholly literal is of no comfort whatsoever. The reality will be far worse than the image. What, then, are the 'fire' and 'darkness' symbols for? They are vivid ways to describe what happens when we lose the presence of God. Darkness refers to the isolation, and fire to the disintegration of being separated from God. Away from the favor and face of God, we literally, horrifically, and endlessly fall apart.[40]

To be clear, Keller does not claim that Edwards taught the full postmodern version of hell, only that he 'pointed out that the Biblical language for hell was symbolic'. However, the force of the reference is '*even* Jonathan Edwards'; a nod to Edwards' well-earned reputation for impeccable orthodoxy on the doctrine of hell. Because of this implicit authority, it is worthwhile to consider whether Edwards would really offer any meaningful support to Keller on this issue. Edwards does indeed say that fire is metaphorical in 'The Torments of Hell are Exceeding Great'; but does he give any further indication as to what kind of metaphor it is, or what relation it might bear to Keller's conception?[41] Did Edwards think that hell fire would forever remain metaphorical only, or did he think that it would become quite literal after the general resurrection? We shall consider these questions.

First, it is rather strange that Keller should point to this particular sermon for support of any kind. Edwards makes it explicitly clear in this sermon that he did not think that fire was metaphorical for mere separation from the presence of God.[42] In fact, he prefaced his sermon with a pointed denunciation of this very position:

> There have been some of the Freethinkers, as they call themselves, of the present age, that have denied that the torments of hell are so great as they are generally pretended to be [...] They therefore endeavor to make themselves and others believe that they ben't so intolerable as many imagine.[43] They make the misery of hell to consist principally in the punishment of loss: they shall be cast out of God's sight and shall not have God's favor as others shall; they shall lose the enjoyments of this world and the pleasures of heaven.[44]

Edwards is preaching this sermon against those who teach a doctrine of hell in which the punishment is defined in terms of being 'cast out of God's sight'. This means, first of all, that any use of this sermon as support for the very approach that Edwards is preaching against would be ill-advised. Moreover, it is an indication to us that Keller's teaching 'for postmoderns' is not really postmodern. Its basic element, that hell is defined in terms of mere separation from God's presence, was around in the 1720s. We know this because one of the Reformed tradition's leading theologians knew of it then, labeled it as an innovation of 'Freethinkers ... of the present age' and preached against it.

With this preface in mind, we consider the sense in which Edwards thought that fire was 'symbolic'. Edwards did not think that fire signifies something bearing only a vague connection to physical fire, such as psychological disintegration. Rather, he was concerned to show that hell torments would be very much like real fire, only vastly more intense.[45] Keller astutely reasons that, 'Since souls are in hell right now, without bodies, how could the fire be literal, physical fire?'[46] Obviously, it could not be, at least not in the intermediate state into which

unbelieving souls are immediately cast. For this reason, when Edwards is speaking about the intermediate state (as he was in this particular sermon) he admits that fire must be in some way metaphorical. Yet even here, the overall impression he gives is of an extremely close relationship, pointing to something that could not possibly be better described than as a kind of fire.[47]

We can now reveal the actual content of Edwards' metaphor. Edwards thought that the fire of hell was metaphorical ... for the unmitigated wrath of God poured out on the damned.[48] The severity of hell torments was to be seen precisely in that 'the punishment that is threatened to be inflicted on ungodly men is the wrath of God'.[49] This torment is not at all to be thought of as merely permissive or self-inflicted, but consists of God's personal infliction of punishment upon sinners: 'God will set himself to execute wrath upon that man and will give his vengeance full scope.'[50] Indeed, Edwards thought that fire was generally used in Scripture to indicate the divine presence.[51] This fiery presence is a comfort to God's people, but for unbelievers, 'he will be a consuming fire to them. They will be exposed to all the fierceness of the flame of God's vindictive justice ...'[52] All this is put together in a relevant notebook entry:

> And the angry God will appear as most intimately present with [them]: he with his wrath will be in them and before them and everywhere round about them, expressing his furious displeasure; and they shall see and feel and be as sensible of God's presence, as we are of a man's that stands before our eyes. [...] The appearances of the presence of [an] angry God in them and everywhere round about them, can be represented by nothing

better than by their being in the midst of an exceeding hot and furious fire.[53]

The wrath of God can be 'represented by nothing better' than fire.

Finally, although Edwards is focusing on the intermediate state in the sermon we have been looking at, he also discusses the post-resurrection situation when sinners will once again have physical bodies. Edwards thinks that 'metaphors of fire will probably be no metaphor after the resurrection'.[54] Indeed, in a notebook entry written within months of 'The Torments of Hell are Exceeding Great',[55] we find Edwards working out the physics of hell fire:

> Hell is represented by fire and brimstone; and if by that is meant such fire as lightning, then without doubt the torments of hell are inconceivably great. For the fire of lightning is many degrees hotter than the fire of the hottest furnace ... Lightning is a stream of brimstone; and if that stream of brimstone which we are told kindles hell be as hot as streams of lightning, it will be vehement beyond conception. 'Tis probable that this earth, after the conflagration, shall be the place of the damned.[56]

This is not the only place in which Edwards makes it abundantly clear that he held the most literal belief imaginable that there would be physical fire in eternal hell. He notes the correlation between the literal water of Noah's flood and the literal fire which will be used to destroy the world.[57] He wonders that 'some divines should be at a loss for fire to enkindle the last conflagration, when the Scriptures plainly tell us that the visible universe shall all be rolled together [Is. 34:4], and it is

all now made up with little else but fire—vast globes of infinitely fierce and vehement liquid fire'.[58] He wonders if perhaps the final conflagration will in turn fuel the fires of hell.[59] Now there is no need to follow Edwards in every tentative speculation found in his unpublished private notebooks, but the point remains crystal clear: his idea of eternal hell is categorically antithetical to the 'brimstone-free' conception that is the subject of this essay.

If not Jonathan Edwards, which theologians might provide Keller with solid support for this idea of hell? The obvious answer begins with C. S. Lewis. However, on this point Lewis was largely transmitting the teaching of someone he called his 'master', George MacDonald.[60] This is significant because MacDonald thought that 'nothing could be worse' than the 'vile', 'monstrous', 'pagan notion' of the penal substitutionary atonement and developed his theology in self-conscious opposition to it.[61] MacDonald's doctrine of hell was no incidental side-show to this anti-penal substitutionary system of theology, but was an integral part of it. Now we know that Keller received the 'postmodern' doctrine of hell from an intermediate source, unaware that it was hardwired to function within a heretical system. However, it nevertheless comes with dangerous systematic implications and it is only a matter of time until it does exactly what it was designed to do: render the penal substitutionary atonement unnecessary.

Conclusion

We have considered three basic questions concerning the doctrines of judgment and hell: who sends people to hell, who keeps them there, and who metes out the punishment in hell? The traditional and biblical answer to all three

questions is God. God sends people to hell, God keeps them there, and God inflicts the punishment in hell. Keller's teaching for postmoderns, on the other hand, gives a rather different set of answers. Man sends himself to hell, man never asks to leave hell, and man inflicts upon himself the punishment of hell.

This brings us to the larger question concerning Keller' teaching for postmoderns. Is it just a new way of saying the same old thing? If it were, we might expect the language to be different but the answers to questions like 'who sends people to hell?' would necessarily remain the same. That is, of course, what we mean by 'saying the same old thing'—however you want to get there, you still have to come up with the same answers.[62] Yet we have before us two mutually incompatible answer sheets. They cannot both be reflective of the very same eternal truths about judgment and hell.

As we conclude, we consider the value of warnings. We mentioned at the outset the particular importance of the interrelated doctrines of judgment and hell as an indicator of the general theological health of the church, as a 'canary in the mineshaft'. The value of the 'canary' is precisely that it is exceedingly offensive to the culture and thus perpetually vulnerable to theological weaknesses in the church, always running the risk of an untimely demise at the hands of an insider wanting to placate the world. It would not do us much good to dress up an urban seagull to look like a canary. Such an animal would survive all but the most complete departures from orthodoxy, and we might not even notice the toxic winds of compromise already at work among us. We should therefore take care to ensure that our 'canary' is the real thing.

However, there is an even more important warning that we ought to think about, and that is the Lord's warning to speak clearly to sinners about the dangers of hell:

> Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, 'You shall surely die,' and you give him no warning, nor speak to warn the wicked from his wicked way, in order to save his life, that wicked person shall die for his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand' (Ezek. 3:17–18; see also Ezek. 33:7–9).

The church, and particularly ministers, have been given the mission to communicate the 'whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:27). And the principle in Ezekiel 3 is that we must communicate clearly and accurately to unrepentant sinners the reality of what awaits them. Imagine for a moment if Jonah had preached, 'Yet 40 days, and you Ninevites will be left to your freely-chosen identities apart from God!' Or imagine if the angels had said to Lot, 'The LORD is about to give the Sodomites what they most want, separation from him!' These things just might be true in some indirect way, but how clear do they make the warning? For this reason, it is my hope that Dr. Keller and the countless men who look to him for leadership will reconsider whether the postmodern teaching is indeed the clearest way to speak about judgment and hell.

Endnotes

1. 'With intellectual, brimstone-free sermons that manage to cite Woody Allen alongside Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Keller draws some five thousand young followers every Sunday.' *New York Magazine*, dust jacket comment on USA edition of *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*.

2. 'Understanding what the Bible says about hell is crucial for understanding your own heart, for living in peace in the world, and for knowing the love of God' (Keller, 'Hell: Isn't the God of Christianity an Angry Judge?' http://download.redeemer.com/sermons/Hell_Isnt_the_God_of_Christianity.mp3, accessed 15 May 2013); 'Last-day judgment and the reality of hell' is included in Keller's list of thirteen topics that should be regularly included in sermons. (Keller, *Center Church*, p. 308) See also Keller, 'The Importance of Hell' (http://www.redeemer.com/news_and_events/articles/the_importance_of_hell.html, accessed 15 May 2013).
3. J. H. Moorehead '... finds that the real decline in that traditional hell came as a result of a silence about, rather than explicit attack upon, that doctrine' (J. H. Moorhead, 'As though nothing at all happened: Death and Afterlife in Protestant Thought, 1840–1925', *Soundings*, 67, 1984, p.457, quoted in David Powys, 'The Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Debates about Hell and Universalism' in N. M. de S. Cameron, ed. *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1993), pp. 113–114)
4. Late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century English Latitudinarianism, British Deism, German Liberalism, and late nineteenth/early twentieth-century Anglo-American Liberalism would be macroscopic examples. See Geoffrey Rowell, *Hell and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974); David Powys, *'Hell': A Hard Look at a Hard Question* (Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1998); and Albert R. Mohler Jr., 'Air Conditioning Hell: How Liberalism Happens', *IX Marks Ministries eJournal,* January/February 2010.
5. Reason for God, p. 69.
6. 'Universalistic' is more accurate than 'universalist', because Bell's fully consistent Arminian position on the self-chosen nature of hell precludes him from making any certain pronouncement on the eternal destiny of people, whether universalist or otherwise. However, this hardly clears Bell of the substance of the charge of universalism. See Bell, *Love Wins: A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever Lived* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011).
7. Most importantly, hell has a prominent place in Keller's apologetic bestseller, *Reason for God*, pp. 68–83.
8. 'The Importance of Hell'.
9. 'The Importance of Hell'.
10. Timothy J. Keller, 'Preaching Hell in a Tolerant Age', in Craig Brian Larson and Haddon Robinson, *The Art & Craft of Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005). An excerpt is available online at http://www.sermoncentral.com/articlec.asp?article=Tim-Keller-Preaching-Hell-Tolerant-Age&Page=1&ac=true&csplit=9060 (accessed 15 May 2013).
11. It would seem that the message we proclaim is in various ways contrary to every culture, yet the Bible nonetheless insists that we have but one supernaturally-empowered message to declare to the entire world. In Mark 16:15, Jesus tells the apostles to proclaim *the* gospel to the entire world without any hint of differentiation in the message. Likewise in Matthew 28:18–20, the apostles are to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the one name of the Triune God, and teaching them without differentiation or adaptation *all* things that Christ had commanded them. In I Corinthians 1:22–24, there are two different cultures in view, the Jewish

and the Greek, both of which are offended by the Christian message, though at different points. Nonetheless, Paul insists that he preaches the very same message of Christ crucified to them both.

12. In 'Preaching Hell in a Tolerant Age', Keller says that for moderns, 'Hell must be preached as the only way to know how much Christ loved you.' This is what Scripture affirms (Rom. 8:31–39, Eph. 5:2, and 1 John 4:10–11.) However, this is not the fullness of the biblical doctrine. Most significantly, we might query Keller's warnings about how 'Traditionalists are motivated toward God by the idea of punishment in hell. They sense the seriousness of sin. But traditionalists may respond to the gospel only out of fear of hell' (*ibid.*). The Bible does not betray the slightest hint of such concerns. For examples of the Bible's use of fear of hell as a motivation to believe the truth, see Matthew 10:28–33; Luke 12:1–9; 2 Peter 2:1–9; Jude 23. The potential counter-example of 1 John 4:17–18 is concerned with the Christian's assurance of salvation and not the unbeliever's motivation to come to Christ.
13. Keller was hailed by *Newsweek* magazine as 'a C. S. Lewis for the twenty-first century', a quote that is repeated on the dust jackets of several of his books.
14. See Isa. 66:14–16; Matt. 7:21–23; 25:31–46; Luke 12:4–5; 13:23–28; John 5:21–30; Acts 17:31; 2 Thess. 1:6–10; Heb. 10:26–31; 1 Pet 4:5; 2 Pet 2:3–9; Jude 14–15; Rev 11:17–18; 20:11–15.
15. All Scripture quotations in this chapter are from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.
16. Regarding sovereignty, see Rom. 9:11–29. Regarding God as the Judge, see Gen. 18:25; Exod. 12:12; 1 Sam. 2:10; 1 Chr. 16:33; Ps. 7:8, 11; 9:7–8, 16; 50:6; 58:11; 75:7; 82:8; 94:2; 96:13; 98:9; Isa. 33:22; Jer. 11:20; Nahum 1:3; John 8:50; Rom. 3:4–7; 1 Cor. 4:5; and Heb. 12:23.
17. For more on Christ's office of judge, see Ps. 110:5–6; John 5:21–30; 2 Tim. 4:1; James 5:9.
18. *Reason for God*, p. 76.
19. 'Hell: Isn't the God of Christianity an Angry Judge?'
20. 'Hell: Isn't the God of Christianity an Angry Judge?' The quotations are from C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), p. 116 and *The Great Divorce* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 69.
21. Lewis, quoted in *Reason for God*, p. 79.
22. *Reason for God*, p. 78.
23. See chapter 5.
24. See Matt. 13:10–15 and Luke 8:10; see also WCF 1:9. Keller seems to acknowledge this problem (*Reason for God*, p. 76) but does not always act consistently with this understanding. Indeed, a failure to reckon with the seriousness of this problem is something of a trend in Keller's writings, as I have noted elsewhere (see my review of *The Prodigal God* and *Counterfeit Gods* in *Westminster Theological Journal* 72, no. 2 (2010): 444–47).
25. Incidentally, Lewis taught not only that people voluntarily remain in hell but that they can actually leave hell of their own accord, in which case hell serves as 'Purgatory' for them (*The Great Divorce* [New York: Touchstone, 1996], pp. 66–67). Keller does not affirm this part of Lewis' teaching; but neither does he anywhere notify his audience of his disagreement with Lewis on this important point.

26. Exod. 9:14–16; 12:12; 14:15–18; see also Exod. 8:19, 9:20–23; 10:1–2, 12, 21.
27. See Matt. 11:24; 18:6; 26:24; 2 Peter 2:21.
28. See Rev. 6:16–17; 14:19, 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19; 18:8; 19:15.
29. *Reason for God*, pp. 78–79.
30. Keller does not tend to use the term 'damned', perhaps because it is offensive or perhaps because it does not reflect his conception of how people go to hell.
31. 'Preaching Hell in a Tolerant Age.'
32. 'Skid row' is an American colloquialism for a place where homeless people live in squalor.
33. *King's Cross*, pp. 75–76.
34. *King's Cross*, p. 76.
35. '... but the wicked, who know not God, and obey not the gospel of Jesus Christ, shall be cast into eternal torments, and be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power' (WCF 33:2).
36. *Reason for God*, p. 76.
37. See J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), pp. 262–263.
38. J. I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, p. 262.
39. 'The Importance of Hell'.
40. 'The Importance of Hell'.
41. Edwards, 'The Torments of Hell are Exceeding Great,' in *Works* vol. 14 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 310–312.
42. See 'The Importance of Hell'.
43. Ben't is an archaic contraction for 'be not.'
44. Edwards, 'The Torments of Hell are Exceeding Great', in *Works* vol. 14, p. 303.
45. 'The metaphors and similitudes that the Scripture makes use of to signify it, do signify an extreme degree of torment' (Edwards, 'The Torments of Hell are Exceeding Great', in *Works* vol. 14, p. 310).
46. 'The Importance of Hell'.
47. 'But the principal metaphor made use of to signify it is that of fire, which is used here in this place and the most commonly of any throughout the whole Bible ... But as the Scripture represents the matter, this fire is not any fire of an ordinary degree of heat, but it is a furnace of fire. Matt. 13:42 ... But when metaphors are used in Scripture about spiritual things, the things of another world, they fall short of the literal truth: for these things are the ultimum, the very highest things that are aimed at by all metaphors and similitudes' (Edwards, 'The Torments of Hell are Exceeding Great', in *Works* vol. 14, pp. 310–312).
48. See Edwards' 'Blank Bible' notes on Gen. 19:20–22; Exod. 19; Lev. 10:1–2; Deut. 5:25; 32:22; 1 Kings 18:33–35; Ezek. 5:3–4; 9:2; 10:7; Rev. 1:15 in *Works* vol. 24 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
49. Edwards, 'The Torments of Hell are Exceeding Great', in *Works* vol. 14, p. 304.
50. Edwards, 'The Torments of Hell are Exceeding Great', in *Works* vol. 14, pp. 305–306.
51. Edwards, 'Blank Bible' notes on Exod. 13:21; Lev. 10:1–2 in *Works* vol. 24.
52. Edwards, 'The Torments of Hell are Exceeding Great,' in *Works* vol. 14, p. 306.
53. Edwards, 'Miscellany' 232, in *Works* vol. 13 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 350.

54. Edwards, 'The Torments of Hell are Exceeding Great', in *Works* vol. 14, p. 316.
55. , Schafer estimates that 'Miscellany' entry 275 was written in Jan–Feb 1728. See Schafer, 'Editor's Introduction' to *Works* vol. 13, p. 97.
56. Edwards, 'Miscellany' 275, in *Works* vol. 13, p. 376.
57. See Edwards, 'Blank Bible' note on 2 Peter 3:6–7 in *Works* vol. 24.
58. Edwards, 'Miscellany' 929 in *Works* vol. 20 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 174.
59. Edwards, 'Miscellany' 931 in *Works* vol. 20, p. 185.
60. 'This collection, as I have said, was designed not to revive MacDonald's literary reputation but to spread his religious teaching. [...] I have never concealed the fact that I regarded him [MacDonald] as my master; indeed I fancy I have never written a book in which I did not quote from him. But it has not seemed to me that those who have received my books kindly take even now sufficient notice of the affiliation. Honesty drives me to emphasize it' (C. S. Lewis, ed., *George MacDonald: An Anthology* (New York: HarperCollins, 2001), pp. xxxii–xxxiv; xxxvii.
61. 'Very different are the good news Jesus brings us from certain prevalent representations of the gospel, founded on the pagan notion that suffering is an offset for sin, and culminating in the vile assertion that the suffering of an innocent man, just because he is innocent, yea perfect, is a satisfaction to the holy Father for the evil deeds of his children. As a theory concerning the atonement nothing could be worse, either intellectually, morally, or spiritually; announced as the gospel itself, as the good news of the kingdom of heaven, the idea is monstrous as any Chinese dragon. Such a so-called gospel is no gospel ... It is evil news' (George MacDonald, *Hope of the Gospel* (London: Ward, Lock, Bowden and Co., 1892), p. 24. Lewis seemed to hold an all-inclusive view of the atonement: see his comment in *Mere Christianity* (revised and enlarged edition, New York: MacMillan, 1960), p. 8.
62. 'This [the work of translating doctrine into new words] is fine, even essential, on condition that we remain loyal to the biblical revelation. For a translation is one thing (the old message in new words); a fresh composition is something quite different' (John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, 2008 ed. [Downers Grove: IVP, 2008], p. 124).

Losing the Dance: is the 'divine dance' a good explanation of the Trinity?

Kevin J. Bidwell

I. Introduction

Communicating the doctrine of the Trinity to the contemporary world is a necessary but highly demanding task. Some of the specifics of our postmodern and pluralistic situation might be new, but the challenge itself is certainly not. Augustine of Hippo (354–430) long ago expressed the nature of this well-worn path: 'In no other subject is error more dangerous or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable.'[1] In light of these real challenges, some popular preachers simply refrain from talking much about the Trinity. Timothy Keller, however, is not among them. He is rightly esteemed as an outstanding contemporary communicator whose writings consistently feature the knowledge of God, as reflected in the very titles of his books.[2] The doctrine of the Trinity plays a significant role in these works, and Keller is to

be affirmed in his desire to convey this great truth to the current generation.

Likewise, there is no question as to whether Keller intends to teach the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. He certainly has this intention. The question before us is whether his most prominent and distinctive method of communicating the Trinity—the 'divine dance' imagery—is altogether faithful to Scripture, the Nicene Creed and the orthodox Reformed tradition. This is the question that is discussed in this chapter. In other words, this is not a critique of everything that Keller ever said about the Trinity, but only of his use of a particular imagery of questionable validity and having problematic implications.

In order to determine the answer to this question, we must consider whether this imagery and teaching related to it does justice to various elements of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. These elements are the unity of the Godhead, the ontological ordering of the three persons, and the authority-submission relationship between the Father and the Son that is so crucial for our salvation. In the final analysis, however, this essay is not really about Keller personally but rather about the Triune God. It is an attempt to clarify the historic doctrine of the Trinity as it applies to the church and her work.

We have to be honest. The Western evangelical church can hardly be credited with top marks for its approach to the Trinity. There is a fundamental modalism ever-present, a minimalist idea that there is one God with three different faces. The Trinity has sadly been too long neglected. Therefore, it may appear that Keller's desire to emphasize the Trinity with his 'divine dance' motif is at least aiding that recovery. It is my intention to explain that 'dance imagery' projected upon the Triune God

is not to be accepted and does not enhance a recovery of the Trinity for the church.

Of course, even legitimate critical analysis can easily slide into the exhibition of an unhelpful critical spirit. It is my honest desire to avoid such an 'elder brother' attitude, while simultaneously being aware that I am in fact my 'brother's keeper'. It is likely that, in his desire to make the main doctrines of the Christian faith relevant to the contemporary culture, Keller does not realize all of the implications of his teaching. In such cases, we ought to act in everyone's best interest by pointing out why a teaching is problematic. Such scrutiny is not harmful, but loving and salutary. Some readers may not concur with the critique that is presented here. However, we hope that everyone would agree with the larger suggestions that this paper offers: the recovery of the Trinity in our churches for the strengthening of our worship, evangelism, and mission.

II. Understanding the 'divine dance'

Some preliminary considerations

We must always hold before our minds the fact that we are not talking about an abstract theory, but rather the very person and character of almighty God. Therefore great care must be taken in order to guard the church from any inaccuracy, even if unintentional. It is for this very reason that the church fathers labored so long and hard to express this doctrine exactly. Precise language has been hammered out over many years by the church's ablest theologians to express the mystery of the Triune God. This means that, more so than with perhaps any other area, the introduction of new language to articulate the Trinity must be regarded with extreme caution. There is space for

doctrinal development; but not at the expense of faithful creedal or confessional definitions.

Moreover, the doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation for everything else in the system of theology. The introduction of novel terminology for the Trinity could quickly move us into a whole new trajectory, one having far-reaching consequences that may not be fully obvious now. The church is intrinsically connected to the Trinity. However, the church must always ensure that the historic and orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is the teaching that it upholds. A flawed construction of the Trinity will certainly be projected onto the church, with potentially damaging consequences. We ought therefore to receive Calvin's wise counsel regarding our handling of the doctrine of the Trinity; 'Let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends.'[3]

The 'divine dance' motif for the Trinity is no minor key in Keller's thinking and it is not restricted only to his ideas for the doctrine of God. He rolls out this new metaphor upon the story-line of redemption. In the beginning, according to Keller, was the 'dance of Creation'; the Fall was mankind apparently 'losing the dance', the fruit of which was becoming self-centered; salvation supposedly becomes the way back of 'returning to the dance' and getting out of self-centeredness; the eschatological conclusion in the new heaven and new earth is summarized as the 'future of the dance'.[4] However, does this 'divine dance' idea fit within the parameters of Scripture and historical Trinitarian theology?

The Nicene Creed is the universally agreed settlement for orthodox Trinitarian teaching. We cannot venture beyond its boundaries and remain safe; whatever we teach must square

with this summary of scriptural doctrine. Here is the Creed as it relates to the Trinity:

> We believe in one God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;
>
> And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-begotten, Begotten by his Father before all ages, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made; of one essence with the Father, through whom all things came into existence, who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens ...
>
> And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]; who is worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son, who spoke by the prophets ... Amen.

This language is subsumed in the Westminster Confession of Faith: 'In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding: the Son is eternally begotten of the Father: the Holy Spirit eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son' (WCF 2:3).

The measuring rod for Reformed orthodoxy is made plain. The only basis for Trinitarian unity is that the Triune persons are of the same essence ('of one substance' in the Confession). The only possibility for distinguishing between the persons of the Triune God is that the Father is unbegotten and the Son is eternally begotten (John 1:14, 18; 3:16; 1 John 4:9–10); the

Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son (John 15:26). This statement must be constantly set before our minds as we evaluate the possibility of using Keller's dance terminology to explain the Trinity or to distinguish between the Trinitarian persons.

Finally, it is necessary to maintain a distinction between God's being and his attributes.[5] The Confession draws this distinction in its initial definition of God: 'There is but one only living and true God, who is infinite in being'—note the term—'and perfection' (WCF 2:1). This distinction is then reflected in the content that follows. The brief initial clause—'a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions'—defines the being of God, while the long list after this defines his attributes. On the other hand, less faithful attempts to define God often confuse or misplace these things. This is often seen in the recent tendency to install the attribute of love into the definition of God's being. If love is part of our definition of the very being or essence of God, then any attribute (such as justice or wrath) that appears inconsistent with this definition is then commonly dismissed or downplayed, resulting in a distorted theology.[6] We would therefore do well to maintain the distinction between God's being and attributes.

Keller's definition of his teaching on the Trinity

This Trinitarian teaching is encapsulated by the idiom 'The Dance of God' which is expressed most fully in the last chapter of Reason for God and in the first chapter of King's Cross.[7] Keller begins his discussion in Reason for God with a statement no one would argue with: 'The doctrine of the Trinity is that God is one being who exists eternally in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'[8] This should serve as a notice that,

however things actually turn out, Keller intends to teach the orthodox truth. However, this traditional language soon gives way to a discussion that centers on the metaphor of human dance. Here is the quotation at length for reference:

> The life of the Trinity is characterized not by self-centeredness but by mutually self-giving love. When we delight and serve someone else, we enter into a dynamic orbit around him or her, we center on the interests and desires of the other. That creates a dance, particularly if there are three persons, each of whom moves around the other two. So it is, the Bible tells us. Each of the divine persons centers upon the others. None demands that the others revolve around him. Each voluntarily circles the other two, pouring love, delight, and adoration into them. Each person of the Trinity loves, adores, defers to, and rejoices in the others. That creates a dynamic, pulsating dance of joy and love. The early leaders of the Greek church had a word for this—perichoresis. Notice the root of our word 'choreography' within it. It means literally to 'dance or flow around.'[9]

This language is clearly in step with contemporary sensibilities and it has the appearance of conveying the idea of the Trinity. What is the problem? The problem is that, upon closer examination, this language does not refer to the eternal movements of begetting and procession or of unity being based on consubstantiality (of one essence). These are not minor omissions.

Furthermore, the idea is brought forward that the divine attribute of love underpins everything and that the divine movement manifests itself in a Trinitarian revolving dance; voluntarily circling each other. However, these are not the

movements described in the Nicene Creed. Keller uses the early church fathers' use of the doctrine of perichoresis to support his claims with a tenuous etymological link with the English word choreography.

Keller's scriptural supports

Since it appears that Keller's 'divine dance' teaching on the doctrine of the Trinity is problematic, we must review the sources that he cites in support of it, starting with Scripture. Keller rightly wants to demonstrate that what he is teaching is biblical. Even in the apologetically-oriented Reason for God, Keller provides his readers with no less than five biblical citations in a single paragraph supporting his most traditionally orthodox statement of the Trinity.[10] Yet the same cannot be said of the three pages explaining the 'dance' imagery, where the only Scripture to be found is a reference to Mark 8:35 in support of a subsidiary point.[11]

There is more biblical material in King's Cross, but it is not any more compelling. Here is the main point of exegesis in context:

> According to the Bible, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit glorify one another. Jesus says in his prayer recorded in John's Gospel: 'I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory that I had with you before the world began' (John 17:4–5). Each person of the Trinity glorifies the other. It's a dance.[12]

It is difficult to perceive any meaningful connection between the first four sentences explaining the well-established,

thoroughly biblical concept that the Father and the Son glorify one another, and the abrupt conclusion, 'It's a dance.' In what way, precisely, do these words provide clear support for the idea of the 'divine dance'? We are left to wonder, as Keller quickly moves on to lengthy quotations from C. S. Lewis and Cornelius Plantinga.

His main references are to the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:9–11); the teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ that 'whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it' (Mark 8:35); and Christ's high priestly prayer (John 17:4–5).[13] While the baptism of Jesus indisputably teaches the Trinity, overall these passages do not present the slightest hint of a dance, in my view. This is not a solid Reformed hermeneutic on which to assert such a far-reaching teaching as the 'divine dance', which affects our understanding of the very being of God. The Westminster Confession of Faith helpfully guides us: 'When there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly' (WCF 1:9). The citing of these three Bible passages that contain not the slightest hint of Keller's suggestion is no sound exegetical footing, and we are left doubting the validity of this analogy already; but let us continue.

The nub of his argument appears to be an emphasis upon a single divine attribute, which is love. 1 John 4:8 of course tells us very clearly, 'God is love,' so the problem is not whether love ought to be considered a divine attribute. The problem is rather one of selectivity; Keller does not go on to mention other things that God declares Himself to be, such as that he is 'holy' (Isa. 5:16), that he is 'a consuming fire, a jealous God' (Deut. 4:24; Heb. 12:29), that he is incomprehensible (Job

38:1–41; Isa. 40:25), or that he is gracious, compassionate and merciful (Exod. 34:6–7; 2 Cor. 13:14).[14]

He simply decides to focus exclusively on love. He more or less assumes that there is a 'divine dance' and labels it as 'the dance of love'.[15] This magnification of the single attribute of love also happens to be a classic feature of contemporary social Trinitarianism. This school, whose leaders include Jürgen Moltmann and Miroslav Volf, deliberately advocates self-giving love and freedom at the expense of Lordship and a whole array of other divine attributes.[16] Insufficient grounding in Scripture leads Keller to make the same sort of mistake. On top of that, he boldly claims that 'The life of the Trinity is characterized not by self-centeredness but by mutually self-giving love ... that creates a dance ... so it is, the Bible tells us.'[17] Simply put, 'the Bible does not tell us': there is no scriptural evidence for a movement of dance within the inner life of the Trinity.

Keller's appeal to perichoresis, historical theology and etymology

Keller also seeks support for his teaching from historical theology. In *Reason for God*, he speaks of the 'divine dance' concept as if it were a matter of long-established orthodoxy:

> Each person of the Trinity loves, adores, defers to, and rejoices in the others. That creates a dynamic, pulsating dance of joy and love. The early leaders of the Greek church had a word for this—perichoresis. Notice the root of our word 'choreography' within it. It means literally to 'dance or flow around'.[18]

Such a construction gives the impression that the early Greek fathers taught this 'pulsating dance' concept and even had a technical term for it, which is not the case. Keller then goes

on to say that the word they had for 'this' is perichoresis; but this is a confusing equation of a widely-accepted element of historic orthodoxy with something else entirely. [19]

Keller's definition of perichoresis is misleading because this is not how the church fathers used this word. Here is the line or circle of logic: The persons of the Trinity are love—that creates a 'divine dance'—the church fathers labeled this 'divine dance' as perichoresis—the root of the English word choreography means 'to dance or flow around'—it is derived from the Greek word perichoresis—therefore the persons of the Trinity 'dance or flow around' each other. If any of these steps in this circle of logic are broken, then this argument will fall down and the 'divine dance' idea is lost.

The early Greek fathers did not use perichoresis to explain the Trinity. It is believed that it was first used in reference to the Trinity around the eighth century by John of Damascus.[20] When it was used, it was used to preserve the teaching of the Nicene Creed to uphold the unity of the one God and the distinction of three persons who have their being in each other, without any coalescence (John 14:10–11). There had never been any mention of a 'divine dance' by the early Greek church fathers, and I believe that it would mystify them.

Keller cites in support of his definition the fourth-century church father Hilary of Poitiers and the contemporary Reformed theologian Robert Letham.[21] One would suppose, then, that when we turn to the endnote we would find quotations from them along the lines of 'perichoresis means to dance or to flow around'. However, this is not actually what we find. The quotation from Hilary provided in the endnote is that 'Each person of the Trinity reciprocally contains the others, so that one permanently envelops and is permanently enveloped by, the others whom

he yet envelops.'[22] If Keller wants to argue that this somehow amounts to 'dancing' or 'flowing', he is free to do so; but this is hardly direct support for his definition. Incidentally, in the very same section of the writing that Keller quotes from, Hilary concludes that we will never 'find an analogy for this condition of Divine existence'.[23] It is therefore ironic that Keller imports a human analogy of 'dance' into the very being of God, the very kind of thing that Hilary warns against.

The quotation from Robert Letham, who is discussing T. F. Torrance, does not help Keller's case either: '"Perichoresis" involves mutual movement as well as mutual indwelling. It is the eternal movement of Love, or the Communion of Love, which the Holy Trinity is ever within himself.'[24] 'Mutual movement' comes a little closer to what Keller is looking for, although this is still a way off from 'perichoresis means to dance or to flow around'. However, valid support does not come from mere verbal similarity but from agreement in meaning. Here is the section that Letham quotes in full in his book, and this quotation is cited by Keller in his endnotes to support his own case:

> Torrance understands perichoresis in a dynamic way as the mutual indwelling and interpenetration of the three persons 'in the onto-relational, spiritual and intensely personal way' in which he expounds the Trinity. This involves 'mutual movement as well as a mutual indwelling,' in which 'their differentiating qualities instead of separating them actually serve their oneness with each other.' It is 'the eternal movement of Love, or the Communion of Love, which the Holy Trinity ever is within himself.'[25]

Within the same sentence, Letham defines Torrance's 'mutual

movement' by explaining that 'their differentiating qualities instead of separating them actually serve their oneness with each other'.[26] In other words, Torrance's concept of 'mutual movement' is predicated on the 'differentiating qualities' or personal properties. Indeed, one can immediately see how some sort of 'mutual movement' is suggested in eternal begetting and eternal procession.

If a Trinitarian proposal does not include the slightest reference to the oneness of God's essence and any distinguishing qualities based on begetting and procession at all—and we have confirmed that this is the case with the 'divine dance' account—then there is no possibility of finding support from Torrance's definition of perichoresis. You simply cannot have one without the other. Furthermore, Torrance is merely representative of the overall thrust of historical theology in using perichoresis to uphold the essential unity of God and distinction of the three persons, which is a rather different direction of travel than using this concept to authorize a picture of three persons engaging in a 'divine dance'.[27]

Further still, it is drawn from an etymological mistake. He writes, '... perichoresis. Notice our word "choreography" within it. It means literally to "dance or flow around."' To assume that a supposed etymological connection, which is tenuous anyway, then equates to a theological truth, is an etymological fallacy.[28] Divine dance ideas are not supported by historical theology and the application of perichoresis to a 'divine dance' has no precedent within the Trinitarian theology of the church fathers. Therefore, the line or circle of Keller's logic is broken and his argument for the dance metaphor falls down.

Feminist theologians such as Patricia Wilson-Kastner and Catherine Mowry LaCugna find the 'divine dance' imagery

appealing for an obvious reason; by eliminating divine ordering of the persons it provides a consistent theological basis for egalitarianism in the church. However, even LaCugna has to admit that 'philological warrant [connecting perichoresis to dancing] for this is scant'.[29] Keeping in mind the fact that proponents of the 'divine dance' have been compelled to emphasize an etymological connection because they cannot point to any actual support from the history of theology, such an admission by a proponent serves to underscore how precarious this concept is. There is no biblical warrant for it, the early church did not teach it, the very doctrine used to bolster it—perichoresis—is undermined by it, and the philological connection with the word perichoresis turns out to be specious.[30]

Keller's two primary theological sources

We now turn to the two main sources that Keller draws from in his Trinitarian teaching, the first of whom is Cornelius Plantinga, Jr.[31] Keller uses Plantinga to buttress his own proposal for the 'divine dance' in *Reason for God*:

> The Father ... Son ... and Holy Spirit glorify each other ... At the center of the universe, self-giving love is the dynamic currency of the Trinitarian life of God. The persons within God exalt, commune with, and defer to one another ... When early Greek Christians spoke of perichoresis in God they meant that each divine person harbors the others at the center of his being. In constant movement of overture and acceptance each person envelops and encircles the others.[32]

It is apparent that Keller and Plantinga mutually endorse and reinforce each other. We have already considered the 'warp

and woof' of Keller's 'divine dance' and therefore indirectly Plantinga's ideas for perichoresis and 'divine encircling', concluding that it is flawed logic and unsuitable for an orthodox Trinitarian teaching. However, it is necessary to highlight the insertion of the concept of 'defer to one another' from Keller's citation of Plantinga.

Such a concept is not to be found in the Nicene Creed or the Reformed confessions and catechisms. We will return to this when we consider the problematic implications of the 'divine dance'. One place such language is to be found, however, is in the 'Men, Women, and Biblical Equality' statement of which Plantinga is listed as an endorsing signatory. The statement includes the following: 'In the church, spiritual gifts of women and men are to be recognized ... in pastoral care, teaching, preaching, and worship [...] In the Christian home, husband and wife are to defer to each other ...'[33] Rather than being guided by Scripture or the orthodox tradition, it appears that Plantinga has simply projected his egalitarian agenda—a vision of interchangeable individuals having neither personal distinctions nor authority-submission structure—onto the Triune God.

Keller's other main source is the popular Christian writer C. S. Lewis.[34] A passage in *Mere Christianity* that seems to be the first instance of 'divine dance' imagery is quoted in *King's Cross* as well as in *The Reason for God*:[35]

> In Christianity God is not an impersonal thing nor a static thing—not even just one person—but a dynamic pulsating activity, a life, a kind of drama, almost, if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance ... [The] pattern of this three-personal life is ... the great fountain of energy and beauty spurting up at the very center of reality.[36]

As with so much in Lewis, the writing is brilliant and the purpose laudable, but the theology cannot bear close scrutiny. First, this imagery is suspect because it has neither biblical warrant nor (as already outlined) has it a precedent in historical Trinitarian theology. Lewis himself seems to have anticipated that there would be objections when he wrote 'if you will not think me irreverent, a kind of dance'.

Along with countless other Christians, I am thankful for Lewis' contributions to popular apologetics and to children's fiction. However, one suspects that his apologetic motivation and literary imagination got the better of him when he adopted the language of dance to describe the Triune God. Now we can quickly forgive a layman such as Lewis for making this mistake; he had no formal theological training and he explicitly distanced himself from any impression that he was speaking as an authorized teacher of the church.[37] However, it may not be wise for an ordained minister of the gospel to be using Lewis as primary source material in order to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity.

In summary, it is clear that Keller personally believes the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and wants to teach it to this generation in the most attractive way possible. Notwithstanding these good intentions, however, his 'divine dance' imagery lacks any substantial evidence to persuade us that it is a helpful metaphor to recover the doctrine of the Trinity. Keller's biblical warrant for his proposal is too superficial to convince us that this is nonetheless the clear teaching of Scripture. Support from the mainstream history of theology turns out to be illusory. Support from recent theology of dubious orthodoxy proves to be all too real. We thus cannot recommend the 'divine dance' imagery as a helpful way to teach the Trinity. I recognize that

despite what has been written thus far, some readers may yet be reluctant to cast aside this creative attempt by Keller to communicate the Trinity. For this reason, it is important to press the matter further and to consider the problems and implications of accepting the 'divine dance' as an explanation of the Trinity.

III. Problematic implications of the 'divine dance'

Problem 1: the 'divine dance' does not uphold the unity of the Godhead based on essence

The first problem with this teaching is that it obscures the unity of the Godhead based on the divine essence. The historic and orthodox doctrine of the Trinity is characterized by an inherently balanced presentation that upholds both the unity and the three persons of God in perfect harmony.[38] Despite sound statements of Keller's Trinitarian orthodoxy, which we do not doubt, the lasting impression that remains following a reading of his Trinitarian teaching is that of the 'divine dance' motif. This image takes center stage, as it were, in his presentation.

The foundation for sustaining divine unity, according to the Nicene Creed, is only to be on the basis of oneness of essence; and this is omitted in Keller's teaching. The importance of this aspect of the unity of the three persons founded upon the one essence (homoousios) cannot be over-stated. Trinitarian investigation has discovered historically that it walks a theological tightrope and that in every generation there lurk the dangers of modalism, tritheism and subordinationism. These dangers were the primary impetus that lay behind the completion of the Nicene Creed and the insistence upon the oneness of essence to sustain Trinitarian unity.

When the Nicene Creed and the Westminster Standards teach the Trinity, for instance, oneness, threeness and the co-unity of the three (Triunity) are in close proximity and presented in a way that reflects the fact that they are equally ultimate realities about God (WCF 2:3). This perfectly balanced teaching is distilled in the Shorter Catechism for popular dissemination: 'There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory' (WSC 1:6).

Keller obviously intends to convey this balanced truth: 'God is not more fundamentally one than he is three, and he is not more fundamentally three than he is one.'[39] Unfortunately, his preferred means of teaching the Trinity is fundamentally inadequate to accomplish this aim. Moreover, Keller's attempts to integrate the divine dance teaching theologically only make things worse. He unwittingly departs from the orthodox tradition when he rewrites the basis for the unity of the Godhead: that 'God really has love as his essence' and that the persons of the Trinity are 'characterized in their very essence by mutually self-giving love'.[40] Therefore, Keller's account demands that essential unity—an aspect of God's being if there ever was—be upheld by an attribute. It is at this point that we must recall the prior discussion concerning the problems that arise when we do not maintain a clear distinction between God's being and his attributes.

Keller insists that 'ultimate reality is a dance' wherein the Trinity is 'characterized in their very essence by mutually self-giving love. No person in the Trinity insists that the others revolve around him; rather each of them voluntarily circles and orbits around the others.'[41] These statements which are intrinsically associated with this 'divine dance' teaching have

problematic implications. First, God's essence is redefined as being 'love' instead of 'the same substance': thus love replaces substance as the premise for divine unity. Also, divine love is redefined as 'mutually self-giving love', which is a dance involving the persons of the Trinity doing voluntary circles.

Keller has lost the dance. Trinitarian unity is not founded upon a 'divine dance' of love. It is only to be upheld upon the basis of God's essence. Calvin's statement representing Reformed orthodoxy is so much simpler to grasp: 'In Scripture, from the creation onward, we are taught one essence of God, which contains three persons.'[42] I cannot envisage that Augustine, the early Greek church fathers who were the architects of the Nicene Creed, John of Damascus, or Calvin could subscribe to Keller's definition of essence and his suggested basis for Trinitarian unity. The Athanasian Creed sets valuable creedal boundaries and affirms: 'We worship One God in Trinity; neither confounding the persons, nor dividing the substance.'

Problem 2: the 'divine dance' movements portray the wrong kind of motion within the Trinity

There is a dynamic movement between the persons of the Trinity. This is the act of the Father eternally begetting the Son, and then sending him as the God-man, along with the action of the procession of the Holy Spirit. These movements do not portray the being of God as static, but that of one who is 'outward-moving'. Calvin and Owen display some of the finest Trinitarian theologies among the Reformed orthodox. Calvin states that the Father is 'the beginning and the source', and also 'the fountainhead and beginning of deity—and this is done to denote the simple unity of essence'[43]: yet he purposefully avoids any hint of subordination, inferiority or inequality

among the three persons. These divine movements are not captured by 'voluntary circles or orbits'; but the clear pattern of order is: from the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19; John 1:14, 18; 15:26; 1 Cor. 12:4–6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Gal. 4:4–6; Eph. 4:4–6).

A crucial question must be answered. How are we to distinguish the three persons if they share an identical essence? While they are identical in essence, they are not identical in terms of their particular relations, which Owen calls their 'peculiar relative properties'.[44] Letham represents Reformed orthodoxy as he defines these peculiar relative properties: 'The Father is not begotten, nor does he proceed; the Son does not beget, nor does he proceed; the Spirit neither begets nor spirates.'[45] On the basis of Paul's Corinthian benediction (2 Cor. 13:14), Owen magnificently demonstrates that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit display identifying attributes. Grace (charis) is particularly communicated by the Son, love (agapē) by the Father and fellowship (koinōnia) by the Holy Spirit,[46] and simultaneously the one being of God is indivisible. Owen does not constrain the Trinity to a single attribute.

The imagery of a dance would never have been thought imaginable as a suitable portrait for Owen and Calvin's theology. Why? Dancing in their day was restricted to the realm of worldly or lewd entertainment; the Westminster Larger Catechism associates 'lascivious dancings' as one of many sins in connection to the breaking of the seventh commandment (WLC 139). Is contemporary culture so different that a dance can accurately depict movement within the eternal Godhead? Dancing at its best is to move rhythmically to music, to a particular sequence of steps, with the goal of entertaining people or for the personal pleasure of the dancers.

How about the range of dance genres that could be invoked in the minds of readers to aid them to conceive of the ineffable essence of God? To one reader, break-dancing may be invoked in their thinking, to another the tango or the waltz, to someone else ballet, or to others disco-dance. None of these contemporary dance movements remotely convey the theological implications of outward-moving divine action. In fact, dance movements with voluntary circles are incompatible with the biblical concepts of begetting, sending and procession. It is therefore inconceivable that Calvin, Owen or any of the Reformed orthodox could subscribe to the introducing of a 'divine dance' motif to pastorally help churches to rightly understand the Triune God or to fulfill the great commission.

Problem 3: the 'divine dance' does not promote a balanced presentation of the Trinity as found in the Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed is one of the most important presentations of the Trinity in the history of the church. It is a statement of theology proper, one which strengthens the church's doctrine, worship, apologetics and mission when it is rightly understood. This balanced presentation of the Trinity avoids the use of speech that goes beyond the limits of the Bible. It teaches the faith that we profess, which is to 'believe in the one God'. There is no confusion as to understanding the distinction of the persons and their divine ordering: the Father Almighty; the one Lord Jesus Christ who is begotten of the Father; and the Holy Spirit who proceeds, the Lord and giver of life.

This creed simply asserts that the unity is upheld by God being of 'one substance' and therefore the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit together are to be worshiped and glorified. The Trinitarian order is distinct, clear, unmistakable and without

confounding the persons. Contrast this with Keller's portrayal of the three persons in a pulsating dance of voluntary orbits where it is impossible to distinguish 'who is who' among them. It is baffling to imagine how the 'divine dance' teaching could be encapsulated in a creedal statement. Lacking any reference to a divine substance, or anything that might distinguish one person from another, it would certainly be brief; but would it convey the balanced presentation of the Trinity that is found in the Nicene Creed?

Problem 4: the 'divine dance' undermines the divine order between the persons of the Godhead

The fourth problematic implication of the 'divine dance' is that it fails to make clear that there is an ordering of the persons within the Godhead. When theologians teach the Trinity, they refer to certain elements that explicate the orthodox doctrine.[47] One of these elements is 'taxis' or ontological ordering. The Westminster Confession affirms this element in the very first mention of the three persons: 'The Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son' (WCF 2:3). The Confession cannot simply speak of equal persons without immediately explaining their differences in terms of their peculiar relations. The Father alone 'is of none', the Son is 'eternally begotten of the Father' and the Spirit eternally proceeds from both 'the Father and the Son'.

This ordering of the persons of the Triune God can only be upon the basis of their 'personal properties' that distinguish the three persons, and this is glaringly absent from Keller's 'divine dance' teaching. This is unacceptable. The begetting

of God in the act of eternal generation by the Father is the only sustainable idea that we can employ to explain the concept of a Father–Son relationship 'in God' in its greatest and most meaningful sense. This is richly communicated in the Nicene Creed, in that the Lord Jesus Christ is: 'The Son of God, the Only-begotten, Begotten by his Father before all ages, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made; of one essence with the Father.'

Without this ordering of the persons, all you have are three interchangeable persons having names that mean nothing. The 'divine dance' teaching that lacks the doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and the distinguishing relational properties of the persons of the Trinity thereby introduces theological weakness into the doctrine of the Trinity, with implications for Christology. This metaphor then, does not serve to enhance our appreciation for the doctrine of God, it undermines it.

Unfortunately, however, that would seem to be where this teaching lands us. Again, Keller's description of the Trinity is that 'Each of the divine persons centers upon the others. None demands that the others revolve around him. Each voluntarily circles the other two ...'[48] Whether Keller realizes it or not, this account of the divine being constitutes a denial of ordering within the Godhead.[49] What is to distinguish these three persons from one another? What would enable us to decide which one of these three persons to call the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit? Unfortunately, there is nothing in Keller's elaborations of the 'divine dance' that would allow anyone to uphold this vital aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity. All that the 'divine dance' can conjure up for us are three interchangeable individuals, to whom we arbitrarily assign names that mean nothing in particular.

Problem 5: the 'divine dance' has the danger of tritheism

A related problem is with one of Keller's primary sources for his 'divine dance', which is Cornelius Plantinga's social Trinitarianism, a school of thought in which 'threeness is very much to the fore. Each divine person is thought of as a center of consciousness. Here the danger is tritheism.'[50] This admission of the danger of tritheism in social Trinitarianism by Kevin Giles, who is himself a friend of the school, is interesting. However, Giles still wants to reassure us that 'Among evangelical scholars the "social" model of the Trinity is advocated and defended by Cornelius Plantinga Jr., Millard Erickson, and J. Scott Horrell, each of whom wants to exclude any suggestion of tritheism.'[51]

Such assurances aside, a tendency towards tritheism is nonetheless a real problem in social Trinitarianism. Each of these theologians draws a direct parallel between the way individual human creatures exist in relationships and the way the three persons of God supposedly exist. Keller is aware of such tendencies and is rightly critical of them.[52] Sadly, however, he does not seem to recognize just how close the divine dance proposal sits to the social doctrine of the Trinity. Therefore, tritheism becomes a real danger here as well.

Of course, Plantinga would flatly deny tritheism, as would Moltmann and Volf.[53] However, some mainstream theologians remain unconvinced that those who employ the social model can escape this critique.[54] In response to Moltmann's assertion that 'there has never been a Christian tritheist', George Hunsinger writes: 'If this is true then one can only conclude that Moltmann is vying to be the first.'[55] I have evaluated social Trinitarian thinking elsewhere, concluding that:

> Volf and Moltmann's social doctrine of the Trinity exhibits a departure from both Eastern and Western conceptions of the Trinity, the Reformers, historic creeds and the church fathers. The consequent result is that Volf's newly conceived doctrine of the Trinity remains remarkably isolated from the majority of Christendom, and it is still far from being compatible with the broader scholarly consensus.[56]

Although I wrote these words concerning Volf and Moltmann, they apply equally well to fellow social Trinitarian Cornelius Plantinga. We would thus question whether Keller ought to be using such a figure to explain the doctrine of the Trinity in two of his popular books.

Problem 6: the 'divine dance' undermines the authority structure that is directly related to redemption

A number of omissions from Keller's 'divine dance' ideas for the Trinity have already been raised. A changed theology leads to theological implications in other parts of our doctrine, and neglecting to teach the ordering of the persons of the Trinity has real consequences for our understanding of Christ as the mediator, his obedience to the Father as the God-man, and redemption. Perhaps this is why Keller rolls out the 'dance of love' upon his story-line of salvation. However, there is an authority-submission structure within the Godhead.

The notion of an order ('taxis'[57]) requires some clarification because within this Trinitarian context it does not imply an idea of rank or hierarchy within the Triune God but rather an ordered constitution. The clear pattern of order is: from the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit; and this order pervades everything. To cite Calvin again: 'To the Father is

attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity.'[58]

The Bible affirms that Christ in his incarnation submitted to the will of the Father and not the other way around: see, for instance, Christ's prayer in Gethsemane (Luke 22:42; Mark 14:36). That Christ would offer this kind of submissive prayer is further explained in the Gospel of John: 'For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me' and 'The Father has not left me alone, for I always do those things that please him' (John 6:38; 8:28–29). 1 Corinthians 15:28 clarifies this point: 'Now when all things are made subject to him, then the Son himself will also be subject to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all.'

Finally, the third person of the Trinity also takes his place in this authority relationship in submission to both Father and Son (John 14:26; 15:26). In sum, the Father has authority over the Son and the Spirit, the Son submits to the Father but sends the Spirit, and the Spirit is sent by both Father and Son, as reflected in the Standards (WCF 8:1; WLC 54, 71).

However, just as Keller makes no mention of order within the Godhead but rather undermines it by what he says, so he makes no mention of authority structures in the Godhead but rather undermines those also. Consider one of the main statements on the 'divine dance' in King's Cross:

> Theologian Cornelius Plantinga develops this further, noting that the Bible says the Father, the Son, and the Spirit glorify one

another: 'the persons within God exalt each other, commune with each other, and defer to one another ...'[59]

Notice the statement that 'the persons within God exalt each other, commune with each other, and defer to one another'. It is possible that Keller was attracted by other aspects of this quotation and did not notice the problem, but he has ended up commending to the church an explicit denial of authority. Keller goes on to say in his own words: 'No person in the Trinity insists that the others revolve around him; rather each of them voluntarily circles and orbits around the others.'[60]

Rather than a Triune God of three eternally equal persons existing in relations characterized by a divine ordering of the persons with an authority-submission structure, the persons in the 'divine dance' teaching exist and relate purely interchangeably in mutual deference. The notion that the Trinitarian persons 'defer to one another' is inadequate to handle the teaching that Christ is sent by the Father, and that the Son, as mediator, obeys the Father, he does not 'defer to' the Father.

The Father chose and ordained the Son as mediator.[61] The Father called the Son to this office; the Son does not take this office upon himself. Indeed, the Father commanded the Son to carry out this work. Now if we were to join with Plantinga and say that each person 'encircle[s] one another' and 'defer[s] to one another', in what sense could we affirm that Christ was specifically ordained by the Father? In what sense can we say that the Father 'gave him commandment to execute' this office? Three times in 1 John 4 this crucial element of the incarnation is affirmed:

> In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent his only begotten Son into the world [...] In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. [...] And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world (1 John 4:9–10, 14).

However, it would seem that persons who forever 'defer' to one another neither send nor are sent. They simply 'defer'. Consider the statement in the Westminster Confession:

> The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself, which he, through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of his Father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven, for all those whom the Father hath given unto him (WCF 8:5).

If, in fact, the persons simply 'defer' to one another, then in what sense did Christ obey the Father, as when he says in Gethsemane, 'And he said, "Abba, Father, all things are possible for you. Take this cup away from me; nevertheless, not what I will, but what you will"' (Mark 14:36). Now if it were true that the Father actually 'defers' to the Son in the exact same way that the Son 'defers' to him, what would have happened in such a situation? The reason that Christ cites for getting up from his place and proceeding to the Garden, to the cross, and into the grave was that he would demonstrate his love for the Father by perfect obedience to his authority. The 'divine dance' explication of the Trinity would, at best, seem to obscure these things.

The theological conclusion

The aim of this essay has not been to deconstruct Keller's doctrine of the Trinity unnecessarily. At each point we have sought to allow Keller to speak for himself and then to evaluate the strength of his arguments accordingly. We have summarized that the 'divine dance' explanation of the Trinity has no biblical warrant: its appeals to perichoresis, historical theology and etymology have actually undermined Keller's presentation, rather than upheld it. While Keller constantly affirms his intention to teach the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, the six problematic implications of the 'divine dance' idea have led us to conclude that this metaphor undermines the orthodox belief in the Trinity. Our aim is to promote the recovery of the Reformed orthodox understanding of the Trinity. The remaining section of this essay seeks to do that.

IV. Learning from the Dance

Our ultimate goal in this essay is to promote an understanding of the Trinity from a Reformed perspective, even though we engage in a critical evaluation of Keller. We share with him the confessional document for the Reformed tradition in the English-speaking world, the Westminster Confession of Faith. However, in considering the Trinity we can never dismiss the universally-agreed and settled statement of the Nicene Creed. It is critical to point out that the Reformed movement has never operated independently of tradition or without reference to patristic sources. A. N. S. Lane demonstrates that this was the case for Calvin,[62] and Letham contends that the members of the Westminster Assembly were constantly referring to the church fathers in their theological discussions.[63] This means that any attempt to articulate the Trinity should confer with

historic theological documents while upholding the supremacy of Scripture.

With this in mind, we consider seven elements of the doctrine of the holy Trinity that are to be found in the creeds and patristic writings. These are: (1) one being—three persons; (2) one essence (homoousios); (3) three distinct persons (hypostases); (4) mutually indwelling persons (perichoresis); (5) order among the persons (monarchia, autotheos, taxis); (6) three-personal communion (koinonia); (7) knowable and yet unknowable persons. Arguably, all seven of these facets of the Trinity need to be held with equal ultimacy to avoid a slide into error.

Keller's 'divine dance' teaching provides a number of learning points which may hopefully ensure that future doctrinal developments in this area are enhanced. First of all, it should be apparent that many of these elements are inconsistent with any direct comparison with us as human beings.[64] To put it plainly, we are just not that much like the Trinity. So when Keller follows Plantinga and others in projecting an anthropological metaphor onto the being of God, we might predict that there will be things that fall short of the biblical pattern. Sure enough, the 'divine dance' imagery would appear to be able to uphold only three of the elements: three distinct persons, mutually indwelling persons, and three-personal communion. Those who get their understanding of the Triune God from Keller's writing will be very strong on the fact that there are three distinct persons, that they mutually indwell one another, and that they have communion. However, they would probably be weak on the one being and one essence of God and they would simply not know what to do with the idea that there is an ontological ordering (taxis) among the Trinitarian persons.[65]

Any attempt to articulate a doctrine of the Trinity must not

lose sight of the unity of the three persons. The one being of God is wholly undivided and Owen concluded that 'all the works of the Trinity *ad extra* are indivisible'.[66] The unity of God means that all Trinitarian attributes and actions are equally ultimate and mutually interconnected and the value of rightly using perichoresis cannot be overestimated. All three persons participate fully and exhaustively in all the ways and works of the Triune God, while at the same time each of these works is predicated especially of one of the persons.

The mutual indwelling of the three means there is an undivided communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in undivided union. Gregory of Nazianzus, in his Oration on the Holy Spirit, is helpful, capturing this understanding of the indivisibility of persons who are equally ultimate:

> To us there is One God, for the Godhead is One, and all that proceeds from him is referred to One, though we believe in three persons. For One is not more and another less God; nor is One before and another after; nor are they divided in will or parted in power; nor can you find here any of the qualities of divisible things; but the Godhead is, to speak concisely, undivided in separate persons; and there is one mingling of Light, as it were of three suns joined to each other.[67]

Gregory's concerns must not merely be acknowledged in theory, but be fully integrated and manifested in our teaching on the Trinity.

Finally, we need to keep in mind that the Triune God is ultimately an ineffable mystery who is to be rightly worshiped, glorified and enjoyed by his creation. Any attempt to explain the Trinity without also confessing the incomprehensibility of

God will end up making things too easy, overestimating what can be fully grasped by finite human thought and falling short. Calvin believed the Trinity to be a mystery, 'more to be adored than investigated';[68] and Owen similarly expressed the view that 'the utmost of the best of our thoughts of the being of God is, that we can have no thoughts of it. The perfection of our understanding is, not to understand and to rest there. To believe and to admire is all that we can reach.'[69]

Having examined the 'divine dance' teaching under the theological microscope, we can conclude that it would not be safe to endorse it. However, we certainly concur with Keller's pursuit of a Trinitarian motif for the Reformed churches. There is much scope for theological advance in this area because, as Letham points out, 'In the West, the Trinity has in practice been relegated to such an extent that most Christians are little more than practical modalists.'[70] He further adds that many people regard an appreciation of the Trinity to be 'of no real consequence for daily living'.[71] Could a fresh focus on the Trinity as taught in the Nicene Creed, reinvigorate our theology, ecclesiology, worship, and mission?

V. Conclusion

Inaccurate charts or imprecise compass directions may seem harmless at the start of a voyage; but eventually the ship may end up a long way from its intended destination. Prudent captains have therefore always insisted upon the best charts (and the ablest navigators) available. The church must have the same rigorous insistence upon accurate, time-tested charts and skillful navigation by its leaders. Our aim has been to examine the theological charts of Keller in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity. We commend his desire to recover this

doctrine in the church. However, based upon the supreme standard of Scripture and the subordinate helps that have informed our historic Reformed understanding of the Trinity, we must warn that the 'divine dance' imagery is not an accurate chart and it masks hidden reefs.

As a concluding thought, we might also suggest that if Keller had more fully appropriated another of his favorite teachers—Jonathan Edwards—rather than C. S. Lewis or Cornelius Plantinga, he would doubtless have produced far better Trinitarian teaching. For instance, Edwards has a short essay on the Trinity that could amend a range of mistakes discussed above.[72] In place of appropriating lesser sources, it would be delightful to see Keller consistently making use of the very best Trinitarian theology our orthodox Reformed tradition has to offer. We look forward to see whether he will embrace this challenge in future writings.

Endnotes

1. Augustine, 'On the Trinity' in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), 1:3:5, p. 19.
2. *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*; *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*; *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*; *Counterfeit Gods: When the Empty Promises of Love, Money and Power Let you Down*; *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*; *King's Cross: The Story of the World in the Life of Jesus*.
3. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), vol. 1, 1:13:21, p. 146.
4. *Reason for God*, pp. 216–223.
5. See also K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011).
6. Of course, Scripture makes it clear that 'God is love' (1 John 4:8). However, in our theology, we should be careful to say that God is defined as one God in three persons, whose inter-Trinitarian relationships are characterized by the attribute of holy love. This definition of God's being is wholly consistent with a relationship with unrepentant sinners that is characterized by the attribute of holy wrath.
7. *Reason for God*, pp. 213–226 and *King's Cross*, pp. 3–13.
8. *Reason for God*, p. 214.

9. *Reason for God*, pp. 214–15.
10. *Reason for God*, the second paragraph of the section 'The Divine Dance', p. 214.
11. See *Reason for God*, pp. 214–217; the reference to Mark 8:35 is on pp. 216–217.
12. *King's Cross*, p. 6.
13. *Reason for God*, pp. 214–217; *King's Cross*, pp. 4–10.
14. See *King's Cross*, pp. 4–10.
15. *Reason for God*, pp. 216–217.
16. Kevin J. Bidwell, *"The Church as the Image of the Trinity": A Critical Evaluation of Miroslav Volf's Ecclesial Model* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011), pp. 210–212.
17. *Reason for God*, pp. 214–15.
18. *Reason for God*, p. 215.
19. Many credit John of Damascus, 'Exposition of the Orthodox Faith', with coining the term *perichoresis* ('co-inherence')—a term that had already been used in Christology—in relation to the Trinity (John of Damascus, 'Exposition of the Orthodox Faith', in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace [eds], *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* [Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004], vol. 9, 1:8, 11). However, John of Damascus's purpose for developing this concept was to preserve the unity of God. Keller's handling of *perichoresis* would probably mystify John, who belonged to a Nicene tradition that emphasized great care to avoid the introduction of novel language to describe God's essence. Indeed, I think we would all benefit from John of Damascus's conservative approach to theology: 'His aim was, not to strike out views of his own or anything novel, but rather to collect into one single theological work the opinions of the ancients' (S. D. F. Salmond, 'Prologue to the Exposition of the Orthodox Faith', *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 9, p. vii).
20. Letham, *The Holy Trinity: in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2004), pp. 183, 240–41.
21. *Reason for God*, p. 280 n. 1.
22. *Reason for God*, p. 280 n. 1.
23. Hilary of Poitiers, *On the Trinity*, 3:1, 62.
24. *Reason for God*, p. 280 n. 1.
25. Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, p. 365.
26. As with Karl Barth, Torrance is orthodox on the doctrine of the Trinity; however, in many other respects his theology is in error and would not be recommended in general terms.
27. Torrance defines perichoresis as a concept that 'serves to hold powerfully together in the doctrine of the Trinity the identity of the divine Being and the intrinsic unity of the three divine persons' (T. F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* [London: T & T Clark, 1996], p. 102).
28. A wilful sloppiness regarding the etymology of *perichoresis* has become commonplace. Jürgen Moltmann's statement on the matter is telling: 'We arrive at the same result if we use the Greek verbs *perichoreo* and *perichoreuo*. Then the words describe the mutual resting in each other, and a round-dance with one another. Grammatically, however, *perichoresis* derives from *perichoreo*, not from *perichoreuo*. But as an apt description of the shifting round dance of three persons it can quite well be used' (Jürgen Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness Arise!: God's Future for Humanity and the Earth*, tr. Margaret Kohl [St Mary's: SCM, 2010], pp. 154–155). In other words,

Moltmann has to admit that *perichoresis* has no actual historical or grammatical connection with 'dancing' at all. However, since a very similar and easily confused word has the desired meaning, why not use it anyway?

29. Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God For Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991), pp. 271–272; Patricia Wilson-Kastner, *Faith, Feminism and the Christ* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing, 1984), pp. 123–133.
30. Again, notice the distinction between the words *perichoreo* (from which the word *perichoresis* was derived) and the word *perichoreuo* (Moltmann, *Sun of Righteousness Arise!*, pp. 154–155).
31. *Reason for God*, p. 215; Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 20–21; C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Harper Collins, 2002), pp. 175–176.
32. *Reason for God*, p.215; Plantinga, *Engaging God's World*, pp. 20–21.
33. The Council for Biblical Equality, found online at http://www.cbeinternational.org/files/u1/smwbe/english.pdf (accessed 15 May 2013); emphasis added.
34. Keller mentions that Lewis is his favorite author (*King's Cross*, p. 6).
35. *King's Cross*, p.6 and *Reason for God*, p. 215. This doctrinal outline is also reiterated by Keller in a sermon given at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 'Father, Son and Holy Spirit', Mark 1:9–13, Sunday, 15 January 2006; http://sermons2.redeemer.com/sermons/father-son-and-holy-spirit (accessed 15 May 2013).
36. *Reason for God*, p. 215; Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, pp. 175–176.
37. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 6.
38. 'In a rounded doctrine of the Trinity, there should be equal stress on the one being and the three persons' (Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, p. 373).
39. *King's Cross*, p. 6.
40. *Reason for God*, p.216; *King's Cross*, p. 8.
41. *King's Cross*, p. 8.
42. Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, 1:13:1, p. 120.
43. Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, 1:13:18, 20, 23, pp. 142–144, 149.
44. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965, repr. 2004), p. 381.
45. Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, p. 180.
46. John Owen, 'Communion with God' in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 2. The full title of his treatise is 'Of Communion with God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Each Person Distinctly, in Love, Grace and Consolation; or The Saints' Fellowship with the Father, Son and Holy Ghost Unfolded'.
47. See, for instance, Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, 1:13.
48. *Reason for God*, p. 215.
49. One of the editors raised this issue with Keller after *Reason for God* was published, and he specifically affirmed order within the Godhead: 'I do not subscribe to an egalitarian view of the Trinity at all. [...] From all eternity the Father sends the Son and the Spirit proceeds from them—the Father doesn't proceed from the Spirit, etc. Therefore there is an order within the Trinity' (Keller, electronic correspondence with William M. Schweitzer, September, 2008). Yet years after this exchange, Keller

endorses the very same language in *King's Cross*. This may indicate that that he simply does not realize the incompatibility here.

50. Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), p. 81.
51. Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, p. 82.
52. 'Another premise is a belief in the social Trinity, a view that puts much more emphasis on the three-ness of God than his unity and stresses God as a nonhierarchical, loving community rather than emphasizing his holiness.' (Keller, *Center Church*, p. 268)
53. It goes without saying that Tim Keller would deny tritheism; a balanced doctrine of the Trinity is his clearly-stated intention (*King's Cross*, pp. 5–6).
54. Paul D. Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity* (London: T & T Clark, 2002), p. 201 n. 23.
55. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 144, 144 n. 43; George Hunsinger, 'Review of Jürgen Moltmann: The Trinity and the Kingdom of God', *Thomist*, 47, 1983, pp. 129–139, 131.
56. Bidwell, *The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, p. 159.
57. Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, p. 179, n. 29. This explains the variety of meanings of the Greek word *taxis*.
58. John Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, 1:13:18, pp. 142–143.
59. *King's Cross*, p. 6. Keller quotes from C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), p.151; and Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), pp. 20–23.
60. *King's Cross*, p. 8.
61. The Westminster Confession of Faith teaches: 'It pleased God, in his eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only begotten Son, to be the Mediator between God and man ... (WCF 8:1).' 'Which office [of Mediator] he took not unto himself, but was thereunto called by his Father; who put all power and judgment into his hand, and gave him commandment to execute the same (WCF 8:3).'
62. A. N. S. Lane, *John Calvin: Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999); A. N. S. Lane, 'Scripture, Tradition and Church: An Historical Survey', *Vox Evangelica*, 9, 1975, pp. 37–55.
63. Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009); Robert Letham, *Through Western Eyes: Eastern Orthodoxy; A Reformed Perspective* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2007), pp. 94–98.
64. See Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Essays Toward a Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2003), pp. 21–25. The whole essay by Gunton, 'The God of Jesus Christ', is helpful and pp. 21–25 especially uphold the need for an ontological Trinity to serve as 'a foundation for the relative independence and so integrity of worldly reality also, and thus for human freedom' (p. 24).
65. See Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, & Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005).
66. Owen, *Works*, vol. 2, p. 269.
67. Gregory of Nazianzus, 'Fifth Theological Oration: On the Holy Spirit' in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol.3, ed. Philip Schaff (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 14, 322.
68. Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, 1:5:9, 62.

69. John Owen, *Works*, vol. 6, ed. William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965. repr. 2004), p. 66.
70. Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, p. 407.
71. Letham, *Through Western Eyes*, pp. 271–272.
72. Jonathan Edwards, *Treatise on Grace and Observations on the Trinity* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971).

The *Church's* Mission: sent to '*do justice*' in the world?

Peter J. Naylor

Introduction

In October 2011, 'Occupy Wall Street' set up a camp outside St Paul's Cathedral in London; and the church did not know what to do.[1] Everyone else, it seemed, thought that they knew what the church should do and had no hesitation in saying so. Daily TV coverage never failed to show one protest banner that read, 'What would Jesus do?' More than one senior minister of the church resigned. *The Times'* headline of 1 November ran: 'Church leadership in crisis'. Ruth Gledhill wrote:

> The resignation of the Dean of St Paul's is the latest development in an unfolding disaster, not just for the Cathedral but for the entire Church ... There is still no apparent awareness in the Church of quite how damaging this whole episode has been both to the Church and to Christianity in the West ... The Archbishop should have been down there with his own broad tent ... Richard

> Dawkins must be laughing. The Church has sunk itself without the aid of a single torpedo from him. Dawkins' mistake was to target Christianity on the intellectual level and imagine that believers are stupid. Most, or at least many, are not. The social gospel is what attracts them and keeps them there.

Gledhill was both right and wrong in various ways. She was wrong about the church being in mortal danger over the affair. The Church of England may indeed destroy itself but *the* church of Christ is indestructible.[2] On the other hand, the archbishop did eventually appear on the scene as hoped. But in larger terms, Gledhill was wrong on this count as well: the protest was not his business any more than it was Dawkins'.[3] Finally, if Gledhill was right in her assertion that people are attracted to the Church of England by the social gospel, then that is a great tragedy for all concerned, because they are in the church for the wrong reason. In fact, this difficult situation exposed a failure to think clearly. No one was asking the basic question, 'What *is* the church's mission?'[4] That is the subject of this chapter.

Timothy Keller on the Church's Dual Mission

Timothy Keller's understanding of the church's mission is implicit throughout his works but is presented most clearly in his book *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just*. Keller teaches that the church has a twofold mission in this world: to preach the gospel *and to do justice*. This is reflected in Redeemer Presbyterian Church's self-understanding as a church 'seeking to renew the City, Socially, Spiritually & Culturally'.[5] Keller has also put his name to the *Missional Manifesto* which explicitly affirms missional duality:

> We believe the mission and responsibility of the church includes both the proclamation of the Gospel and its demonstration ... The church must constantly evangelize, respond lovingly to human needs, as well as 'seek the welfare of the city' (Jeremiah 29:7).[6]

Keller's work deserves close attention. He is extremely influential, and his ideas about the church's task will be adopted far and wide.[7] He is also raising a fundamental question that ought in any case to be considered.[8] We can in truth be thankful that, in his book *Generous Justice*, Keller calls for Christian love and good works. It is good, for example, to be reminded there of Jonathan Edwards' sermon, 'Christian Charity: The Duty of Charity to the Poor, Explained and Enforced'.[9] Even so, it is apparent that Keller's work calls for a careful examination.

Keller's main thesis is that the church has a twofold mission in this world: (1) to preach the gospel and (2) to do justice, which involves social and cultural transformation and renewal. What would this look like in practice? He spells it out in several places:

> In our world, this could mean prosecuting men who batter, exploit, and rob poor women. But it could also mean Christians respectfully putting pressure on a local police department until they respond to calls and crimes as quickly in the poor part of town as in the prosperous part. Another example would be to form an organization that both prosecutes and seeks against loan companies that prey on the poor and the elderly with dishonest and exploitive practices ... In our world this means taking the time personally to meet the needs of the handicapped, the elderly, or the hungry in our neighborhoods. Or it could mean the

establishment of new nonprofits to serve the interests of these classes of persons. But it could also mean a group of families from the more prosperous side of town adopting the public school in a poor community and making generous donations of money and pro bono work in order to improve the quality of the education.[10]

Common relief ministries are temporary shelters for the homeless and refugees, food and clothing services for people in need, and free or low-cost medical and counseling services. Relief can also mean caring for foster children, the elderly, and the physically handicapped through home care or the establishment of institutions. A more assertive form of relief is advocacy, in which people in need are given assistance to find legal aid, housing, and other kinds of help, such as protection from various forms of domestic abuse and violence ... [Development] includes education, job creation and training, job search skills, and financial counseling, as well as helping a family into home ownership.[11]

That is not all.

We have considered what it takes to help an individual or a family. But what does it take to help entire neighborhoods to self-sufficiency? Most of the best answers to that question begin with a look at the life and work of John M. Perkins. Perkins, born in 1930, founded ministries ... His work has included a dizzying variety of programs, including day care, farm co-ops, health centers, adult education centers, low-income housing development, tutoring, job training, youth internships, and college programs, *as well as very vigorous evangelism and new church planting.*[12]

Such are Keller's ideas, presented in *Generous Justice.* The aim of the present chapter is to examine whether these ideas are biblical.

Preliminary Considerations

Before we embark on this examination, it would be helpful to keep some things in mind. In terms of terminology, we should remember that 'Mission' does not cover everything that the church is called to do. Edmund Clowney wrote, 'The church is called to serve God in three ways: to serve him directly in *worship*; to serve the saints in *nurture*; and to serve the world in *witness*.'[13] For the sake of clarity, we shall reserve the term 'mission' for the third of these: what the church has been *sent into the world* to do.[14] In addition, we must keep in mind five fundamental principles.

1. The church may not act without a mandate

Creation confers absolute rights: what God created he owns outright.[15] He did not breathe into Adam the breath of life and then let him loose to work out his own purpose and to act according to his own wisdom and desires. From the beginning, God told Adam what he must do. Similarly, the church is not permitted to determine its own work. It cannot act without a divine mandate. We see this illustrated in history time and time again. Israel was led out of Egypt by the Lord in the pillar of cloud and fire. At every stage of the journey, they set out and made camp 'at the command of the LORD'.[16] Later on in the history of the nation, David always inquired what the Lord's will was.[17] Likewise, no man could enter the Levitical or Aaronic priesthood unless he was called of God.[18] When King Uzziah presumed to take on that holy office, he was

immediately struck with leprosy.[19] The principle continues in our days: Paul says that no one ought to preach the gospel unless God has called him.[20]

This principle was most strictly observed by Jesus Christ. He did not advance himself as prophet, priest or king, but was appointed by God.[21] He would not receive the throne in any other way than that ordained by his Father.[22] In his earthly ministry, he did nothing except what his Father had given him to do. 'For I have come down from heaven not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me.'[23] When asked to arbitrate in a dispute between a man and his brother, he refused, saying, 'Who made me a judge or an arbitrator over you?'[24] The fundamental principle is that the church cannot undertake any task without a clear mandate from God.

2. There are three spheres: family, nation and church

There are many man-made organizations in this world (schools, trade unions, clubs, etc.), but three fundamental institutions have been created by God: the family,[25] the nation,[26] and the church.[27] To each, God has given a defined purpose and function. In each, he has delegated *limited* authority to particular people: to husbands,[28] kings,[29] and elders[30] respectively. Jesus Christ is over them all, the head of every man, the King of kings, and the head of the church. To him they all must render an account.

So, within the sphere of the *family*, God has invested *married* couples with the right to have children and bring them up. The *state* and its government have been given the power of the sword, to preserve peace and social justice.[31] The Westminster Confession of Faith plainly insists that the church must not interfere in the government's work:

> Synods and councils [of the church] are to handle or conclude nothing but that which is ecclesiastical; and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs, which concern the commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition, in cases extraordinary; or by way of advice for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate [i.e., the government].[32]

The Lord has committed the keys of the kingdom (the preaching of the gospel, its two sacraments, and discipline), to the *church* and its elders, and the state and its rulers must respect this and not intrude.

Andrew Melville and the leaders of the Church of Scotland clearly proclaimed this distinction, in 1590:

> There are two jurisdictions exercised in this realm: the one spiritual, the other civil; the one respects the conscience, the other external things; the one directly procuring the obedience of God's word and commandments, the other obedience unto civil laws; the one persuading by the spiritual word, the other compelling by the temporal sword; the one procuring the edification of the Kirk, which is the body of Jesus Christ; the other, by entertaining justice, procuring the commoditie, peace, and quietness of the Commonweal, the which, having ground in the light of nature, proceeds from God, as He is Creator, and so termed by the Apostle Humana Creatura.[33]

So then, family, state, and church are three distinct spheres with different God-given tasks and powers, and they ought to keep to the limits that God has set for each.

3. We must distinguish between the body and its members

We must always distinguish clearly between a corporate body and the members of that body. Logicians have identified two informal fallacies: the *fallacy of composition*, where the properties of the parts are transferred to the whole; and the *fallacy of division*, the opposite error, where the properties of the whole are attributed to the parts.[34] For example, the fallacy of composition is committed in this false argument: 'All the parts of this machine are light. Therefore this machine is light.' The combined weight of many light parts can produce a very heavy machine. And the fallacy of division is found here: 'This school has an academically strong record. John is a pupil of this school. Therefore John must have an academically strong record.'

We must guard against committing these fallacies in our ecclesiology. The attributes and function of the church as a body are not necessarily the attributes and functions of the members individually. For example, it does not follow that because the church is the bride of Christ, each member is the bride of Christ (a form of the fallacy of division). Because the 'good Samaritan' transported the wounded man on his own animal and paid for his care, it does not follow that the church as a body ought to organize an ambulance service and a hospital or use its funds to help the victims of violence on the streets.[35]

4. We must distinguish between members and office-bearers

In order that each sphere may perform its task, God has placed appropriate 'office-bearers' within each one. Our focus is on society and the church. Society has its governors (king, parliament, judges) and the church has its ministers and elders. Since God is pleased when a society enjoys peace and order, he has placed the power of the sword in the hands of its rulers but not in

the hands of its citizens. Under normal conditions, a citizen cannot assume to himself that power: it is not his task to judge his neighbor, to execute murderers, or to declare war on behalf of his nation. Similarly, although the church is the custodian of the truth of God in the Scriptures, that does not make the church member a preacher.[36]

5. We must distinguish between Jesus' mission and the church's mission

'What would Jesus do?' is a misleading slogan. The Christian is not commanded to do all that Jesus did, and in fact he cannot. Although Jesus Christ set us an example of obedience, holiness, love, etc., and we are called to be changed into his image, nevertheless in other respects he came to do what we could never do. For example, he became incarnate in order to make the Father known, and he came in order to make atonement for us.[37] He became the author of eternal life for us. Because his work in these respects was unique, we cannot assume that Jesus' commission is the church's mission.[38]

Summary

As we consider the church's mission, we must bear these five principles in mind. (1) The church cannot act without a mandate from God. (2) The God-given boundaries between the three spheres of family, nation, and church must be respected. (3) The distinction between the body and its members must be carefully observed. (4) The distinction between the office bearers and the members must be respected. (5) Jesus' commission from his Father was unique and the church cannot assume that Jesus' commission is its own mission.

Assessing Keller's Doctrine of the Mission of the Church

We now turn to examine Keller's case in *Generous Justice.* As we do so, we must make it clear that we would agree on some important areas. Every member of the church is called to righteousness and to Christlike practical love. If he is an employee, he will be honest and reliable; if he is an official, he will be even-handed and not guilty of favoritism. If his light does not shine, something is wrong. This is a point of agreement. Nor are we concerned with a second question, whether the Christian should go further, not merely seeking to live for Christ in the world, but striving to change that world by active social campaigns. Since the Christian is a citizen, he has all the rights of citizenship and he may participate in the political process.[39]

One crucial question only is before us. Should *the church* (as a corporate, organized body) work directly for social and cultural transformation? Certainly it must *proclaim* the truth and *call* for change, for justice, love, kindness and generosity. Should it also take direct action to bring about a new culture, justice, elimination of poverty, and so on? For example, Keller presents the Perkins model for us to imitate.[40] Should we do so? Should we accept these goals as from Christ?

Christ's mission according to Isaiah

On the first page of the Introduction to *Generous Justice,* Keller refers to Luke 4:17–18 (quoting Isaiah 61:1) and Isaiah 42:1–7.[41]

> And he was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written: The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the

> brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.[42]
>
> 'Behold! My Servant whom I uphold, my Elect One in whom my soul delights! I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the Gentiles. He will not cry out, nor raise his voice, nor cause his voice to be heard in the street. A bruised reed he will not break, and smoking flax he will not quench; he will bring forth justice for truth. He will not fail nor be discouraged, till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands shall wait for his law.' Thus says God the LORD, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread forth the earth and that which comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it, and spirit to those who walk on it: 'I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house.'[43]

We can hardly miss the repeated reference to justice: the Lord's servant will establish justice in the earth. Keller immediately begins to develop his case for the mission of the Christian and the church to seek social justice in the world. Justice (Hebrew *mishpāt*), he explains, is 'giving people their rights', 'social justice', and material 'generosity'.[44] He reinforces this by saying that when justice is joined with righteousness (Hebrew *ṣᵉdāqâ*), the combination means 'social justice'. So he translates Psalm 33:5a ('He loves righteousness and justice') as 'The Lord loves social justice.'[45] The logical integrity of the opening page depends on whether Isaiah means 'social justice' and whether Christ's work in that respect is paradigmatic for the believer.

Is this the way to understand Isaiah 42:1–7 and the mission of Jesus? If so, it would be hard to avoid the conclusion that Jesus failed in this mission. During his earthly ministry, he appears to have made no attempt to rectify injustice in Judea and Galilee, let alone among the Gentiles. Why did he not step in to prevent Herod from unjustly executing John the Baptist?[46] Why did he not administer justice to the one who came to him appealing for help?[47] What did he do to reduce the number of poor in Galilee? Where is the social justice that we are being led to concentrate on?

Clearly, when Isaiah spoke, he was referring to the anointed servant, the King.[48] The nature of the justice is determined by the nature of his kingdom. Jesus said, 'My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight ...'[49] In another place he said, 'The kingdom of God is within you.'[50] Christ's kingdom is *spiritual* in nature and *eschatological* in its full accomplishment. John Calvin wrote:

> *He will exhibit judgment to the Gentiles.* By the word *judgment* the Prophet means a well-regulated government ... Now we ought to judge of this government from the nature of his kingdom, which is not external, but belongs to the inner man; for it consists of a good conscience and uprightness of life, not what is reckoned so before men, but what is reckoned so before God. The doctrine may be summed up: 'Because the whole life of men has been perverted since we were corrupted in every respect by the fall of Adam, Christ came with the heavenly power of his Spirit, that he might change our disposition, and thus form us again to "newness of life" (Rom. vi.4).'[51]

His spiritual reign advances unseen by the preaching of the gospel and the Holy Spirit's work within the heart.[52] He does deliver the poor, brokenhearted, captives and blind. Christ himself showed that all these terms refer to a spiritual condition.[53] Of course, he did open the eyes of the physically blind; but such miracles were *signs* identifying him as Messiah and pointing to his spiritual work.[54] Only when Christ returns in glory will his reign of righteousness be established fully and finally in new heavens and a new earth.[55]

If Isaiah's promise of Christ's reign produces a 'passion' in the hearts of believers, it is a passion for the gospel harvest and for Christ's return.[56] Certainly, the injustice found in the world causes grief; but the hope of deliverance from it does not lie in the way of cultural and social transformation.

Is Job a paradigm for the Christian?

Keller states that Job 'illustrates what this kind of righteous or just-living person looks like' and shows that 'the righteous life ... is profoundly social'.[57] Further, he says, 'We see direct, rectifying justice when Job says, "I took up the case of the immigrant ..."'[58] Taking his cue from Job, Keller suggests that Christians must take social action: they might respectfully put pressure on a local police department or form an organization that prosecutes loan sharks, and so on.[59]

Job is certainly a wonderful example of justice. But Keller has overlooked one crucial fact. Job was no mere private citizen but a prince and a judge. He sat 'in the gate', which was the place where the elders would try cases and deliver judgments, the equivalent of today's courts of justice.[60] He was like a king.[61] It is one thing for a Christian to emulate Job's uprightness in all his dealings with his neighbors; but it is a different matter

for a Christian to begin to act as if he had the authority of a judge. Moral authority is not the same as legal, or official, authority. The latter authority has been given to the governing authorities to exercise 'direct rectifying justice'.[62] There is a significant difference between exercising citizenship and interfering with the police and the courts, between speaking for justice and actively prosecuting the wicked. Indeed, even if we believe that citizens have the right to bring law cases against oppressive lending institutions, it is quite another thing to add that work to the church's task. In principle, it is an error to take the work of the governing powers and attribute it to the church. A similar error is committed—in the opposite direction—when, for example, Christ's instruction about turning the other cheek (which was for his disciples) is misapplied to a judge at law, or a nation at war.[63] Judges must not turn the other cheek, but administer justice. Rulers must not turn the other cheek, but call the nation to arms in defense of life and liberty.

In the same context, Keller refers to King Lemuel, who was commanded to 'judge righteously',[64] and to Judah's king on David's throne, who was commanded to 'execute judgment and righteousness'.[65] As with Job, these men held an office that gave them authority to judge. We must not obscure the distinction already set out. Righteousness or justice is the same for all; but the exercise of justice in society is a burden of office.

The law and the Christian

Keller is undoubtedly right that Old Testament law has 'some abiding validity' for the church today and that in Jesus' teaching we hear the Old Testament again.[66] He presents several references to justice in Israel[67] and the justice of God's own character.[68]

However, in all these places, the law is regulating the internal life of the covenant people.

This does not mean that the law had no relevance to other nations.[69] The prophets addressed oracles to the nations and made it clear that God would judge them too.[70] But the prophets did not send Israel into those nations with the task of imposing the covenant culture and the law's justice upon them. Jonah, for example, did go into a foreign nation with a message of impending judgment for their wickedness; but Jonah did not lead Israel into Nineveh in order to transform its culture. Indeed, Israel's possession of the law distinguished it from the Gentile nations. It was Israel's glory to have the law and the wisdom of God contained in it.[71]

The poor

The Lord gave his people a land flowing with milk and honey, in which each tribe and family had an allotment of land as a possession, an inheritance. Fruitfulness, success, and wealth were temporal blessings of God, which he added to his chief, spiritual, blessings.[72] Prosperity resulting from industry or received as an inheritance was not wrong; Abraham's servant could testify, 'The LORD has blessed my master greatly, and he has become great; and he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female servants, and camels and donkeys.'[73] Indeed, even in the period of history since the New Testament, it has often been the case that where a biblical work ethic has been inculcated, prosperity has followed.[74]

Nevertheless, even in the land flowing with milk and honey there were almost always poor or needy people. First of all, the Levites were placed in a permanently dependent position. Unlike the other tribes, God gave the Levites no land. Instead

of land, the Lord appointed for them another work to do and another form of income: the tithes and a portion of the sacrifices which the other tribes brought.[75] There were also widows and orphans, who did not have a man's strength, care, and protection. Even if they still owned the land, they were not able to benefit from it. In addition to these, no land was given to foreigners and hence, if one did come to Israel, he was unable to provide for himself from the land. The law spoke about the stranger who is 'within your gates', that is, the foreigner who had entered Israel and was subject to the laws of Israel. The book of Ruth provides a detailed case study: there is Boaz the landowner, Naomi the widow, and Ruth the stranger who had come to seek refuge under the wings of the Almighty.[76] In Israel, there were also people who had become poor for a variety of reasons; perhaps foolishness or laziness,[77] oppression,[78] chastening,[79] and God's sovereignty in sending and withholding rain.[80]

Several laws addressed the needs of Levites, widows, orphans and strangers: tithes were principally for the Levites but also for the widow, orphan and stranger,[81] and gleaning was allowed.[82] Greed was challenged: landowners were not to harvest everything. Those who became poor, for whatever reason, were not left without hope: the seventh and the fiftieth years were years of redemption or jubilee, when slaves were freed, debts written off, and land restored.[83]

Keller argues from these laws that the church should take direct action to alleviate the poverty of the city.[84] However, these laws were given to regulate the life of the covenant people, not to dispatch them to the wider world with cartloads of grain. We see clear continuity in the New Testament church, in its support for the ministry,[85] its care for its believing widows,[86] and its relief of its poor.[87] Careful examination of

these texts shows that this material support was available to those within the church. There was not a needy person *among them.*[88] The test of a widow's eligibility was strict: she had to be a member of the church, known there for her good works and godliness, not a young woman who could marry again, nor one who had believing family.[89] This corresponds with the law's phrase 'within your gates'.[90] There is no evidence that the church at Ephesus ran a social service for all the widows in the city; in fact, *the text of 1 Timothy 5 shows us that it did not do so.*

Keller says, 'Today this quartet [widow, fatherless, stranger, poor, of Zechariah 7:10–11] could be expanded to include the refugee, the migrant worker, the homeless, and many single parents and elderly people.' He translates 'strangers' as 'immigrants'.[91] But none of the main English versions chooses the term 'immigrant'.[92] Taken out of context, that translation would be misleading, because it would almost certainly suggest someone who, for example, has crossed from Mexico into the United States, or from Africa to Europe, in order to find employment and a better lifestyle. In the Old Testament, a stranger who came into Israel was in fact entering the context of the church. The spread of the church among the nations and the separation of church and state means that such an 'immigrant' does not simultaneously enter the church. The 'stranger within your gates' is simply not equivalent to the immigrant. Where the New Testament epistles speak of strangers, they refer to those whose service to Christ has caused them to travel away from home. The Apostle John encourages the church to offer hospitality to 'the brethren and strangers' who are travelling in the service of Christ, fellow-workers.[93] When the author of Hebrews reminds believers to entertain strangers and

remember those in prison, he is not advocating an open home to all and sundry or general prison visitation, but brotherly love, particularly towards those whose needs arise through persecution.[94] This does not rule out *a Christian* helping a foreigner who comes to live nearby; but neither does it lay an obligation on *the church* to meet the social needs of society's immigrants. The law differentiated between covenant members and strangers. For example, the Israelite was allowed to charge interest to the foreigner but not to an Israelite.[95] Foreign slaves were not released along with Israelite slaves.[96] Land was restored to Israelites but not donated to foreigners. A careful study of the law and of its continuity in the New Testament does not support Keller's application of it to a dual-track mission of the church.

Redistribution of wealth

Keller teaches that the laws of jubilee support the redistribution of wealth,[97] 'the ultimate relativization of private property'.[98] 'Israel did redistribute money, assets, and even land from the well-off to the poor, with the help of state-sponsored laws and institutions.'[99] This is a complete misunderstanding of the laws of jubilee. Those laws (which were not state-sponsored) did the very opposite of what Keller says they did. Far from *relativizing a person's property*, the law was designed to *preserve it*. So, if you, an Israelite, were forced by poverty to sell your inheritance land, it was not lost forever. Remember God's judgment for the daughters of Zelophehad: 'every one of the children of Israel shall keep the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers'.[100] Naboth would not sell or exchange his inheritance.[101]

The preservation of private property (it is better to speak of the family's inheritance) and the release of Hebrew slaves had

a spiritual purpose: the jubilee was redemptive, not economic.[102] It was essential that covenant families could live in the land where God was among them, where his tabernacle was. Isaiah denounced those who joined house to house and field to field, not because it was a sin to be wealthy, but because by their actions they were preventing the poor from remaining in the land of covenant promise.[103] Redistribution of wealth is not found in the New Testament either. Ananias and Sapphira did not have to sell their property and they did not have to bring the proceeds to the apostles.[104] Kuiper says, 'There was nothing compulsory about it.'[105] What was required was truthfulness.

The Westminster Confession of Faith explicitly repudiates what Keller advocates. On the communion of the saints, it states: 'Nor doth their communion one with another, as saints, take away or infringe the title of property which each man hath in his goods and possessions.'[106] Robert Letham explains that this was 'directed against sects such as the Levellers, who wanted private property abolished. The communion that saints enjoy with each other does not erode or destroy the integrity of the individual, and in particular his or her property.'[107] Indeed, Scripture teaches that governments have a right to levy taxes, but it explains the purpose: it is to enable them to attend continually to their duty.[108] It does not support taxation designed to redistribute wealth. Similarly, the tithes and offerings of God's people are to enable the church to fulfill its task, not to equalize the wealth of its members.

Keller says, 'If you do not actively and generously share your resources with the poor, you are a robber.'[109] Follow his logic: God requires justice; justice demands generosity; and so any lack of generosity is injustice and robbery. The basic problem with this reasoning is the confusion of justice with generosity,

two separate and distinct things in Scripture. When Paul asked the Corinthians to send relief to their Judean brothers, he did not command them on the basis of justice, as if failing to do so would be theft, but appealed to their willingness on the basis of God's grace.[110] Without doubt, the Bible calls for generosity.[111] If a professing Christian cannot bring himself to show practical kindness, the genuineness of his own salvation by grace must hang in doubt.[112] However, this is very different from saying that he is a 'robber'.

Moreover, the liberality taught in Scripture is not intended to equalize wealth but to meet needs, particularly the needs of the household of faith.[113] Christianity is not a form of socialism or communism.[114] It respects private property. In fact, difference in wealth is just one of many differences that God has ordained among people. We have different gifts and abilities, different life spans and health, etc., and in fact we are led to believe that even in the eschatological kingdom of God we shall be granted different rewards, all of grace.[115]

The last step of the case—from the believer to the church

The believer has been given a place in all the spheres of life: in the family, the nation, and the church. In each sphere he or she must exercise love in his or her capacity as a husband or wife, a father or mother, a citizen, and a member. The same thing cannot be said about the church, which is one sphere of the three, and which is not identical with the state and is not an institution of the state, but is in fact a distinct, and 'transcendent', sphere.[116]

Keller assumes, without proving it, that the duty of the individual is somehow also the duty of the church.

> Many believe that the job of the church is not to do justice at all, but to preach the Word, to evangelize and build up believers. But if it is true that justice and mercy to the poor are the inevitable signs of justifying faith, it is hard to believe that the church is not to reflect this duty corporately in some way.[117]

This is not precise enough. No one is suggesting that 'the church is not to do justice at all'. That is a straw man. The church's elders and deacons serve the interests of justice and mercy.[118] But those offices are established in the church and not in the state; they are entrusted with the care of Christ's flock and not the general oversight of society at large. Paul charged the elders of the church at Ephesus, 'Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which he purchased with his own blood.'[119] Peter gave the same instructions: 'The elders who are among you, I exhort ...: Shepherd the flock of God ... those entrusted to you.'[120] 'For what have I to do with judging those who are outside?'[121] And in Keller's second sentence quoted above, his expression, 'it is hard to believe ... in some way', is very vague. In that vagueness, he takes the crucial step—from the justifying faith of the believer to the corporate duty of the church. We cannot build a solid ecclesiology on such a vague foundation.

In what follows, having described at length grandiose programs of social restructuring, Keller back-pedals. He insists that 'word and deed' ministry cannot be separated, that the burden of social justice and cultural transformation cannot be lifted from the church's shoulders; and yet he concedes that Abraham Kuyper's ideas about sphere sovereignty are 'generally right',

thereby substantially removing the burden of the second track of the dual-track mission.[122]

> As we have said, churches under their leaders should definitely carry out ministries of relief and some development among their own members and in their neighborhoods and cities ... But if we apply Kuyper's view, then when we get to the more ambitious work of social reform and the addressing of social structures, believers should work through associations and organizations rather than through the local church ... Churches that, against Kuyper's advice, try to take on all the levels of doing justice often find that the work of community renewal and social justice overwhelms the work of preaching, teaching, and nurturing the congregation.[123]

This is an interesting statement. Not only is this a tacit admission that the Bible does not with any clarity mandate a dual-track mission (if it did, Keller himself would not need to speak in this way; no such qualifications are needed when we speak of the church's single mission to make disciples), it also points to the inescapable problem with social action. When the church does engage in this type of enterprise, it inevitably absorbs resources of time, energy and money from the preaching and witnessing task. Keller speaks as if there is a certain point at which this becomes problematic, but he does not demonstrate how this effect is not already in operation the moment the church becomes involved in this kind of work at all.

In a subsequent book Keller appears to modify or retract his position. He writes, 'I have argued in *Generous Justice* and elsewhere that while the mission of the *gathered* (institutional) church is to proclaim the gospel of individual salvation, to win

people to Christ and form disciples, yet the will of God for the church *dispersed*—Christians living in the world—is to minister in both word and deed, to do evangelism and to do justice.'[124] This appears to be an important step away from the idea of the dual track mission of the church. However, it is clear that in the same book, *Center Church,* the same old dual-track message is still being promoted. For example, he says that 'faithful churches' have 'evangelistic outreach as one of their goals' but also that 'They are looking for ways to strengthen the health of their neighborhoods, making them safer and more humane places for people to live'.[125]

Distortions

Enveloped in the prevailing materialism and consumerism of the world, especially in the G8+5 countries,[126] some may be tempted to believe that material poverty is the greatest evil suffered by the human race.[127] It is not so. Man's plight, at the most profound level, lies in his sin, guilt and misery, in his being under the wrath of God, and in his being subject to the power of the devil and death. In short, his basic need is spiritual, not material. Whilst not wishing to belittle the sufferings that poverty can bring, we must insist that the world needs Christ, and all else is entirely secondary.

Keller focuses on the materially poor. This involves a distorted picture of human need and produces distortions elsewhere in his doctrinal system. For example, Keller's interpretation of the incarnation is thereby distorted.

> Jesus, in his incarnation, 'moved in' with the poor. He lived with, ate with, and associated with the socially ostracized (Matt. 9:13). He raised the son of the poor widow (Luke 7:11–16) and

> showed the greatest respect to the immoral woman who was a social outcast (Luke 7:36ff). Indeed, Jesus spoke with women in public, something that a man with any standing in society would not have done, but Jesus resisted the sexism of his day (John 4:27). Jesus also refused to go along with the racism of his culture ...'[128]

> In Proverbs we see God identifying with the poor symbolically. But in the incarnation and death of Jesus we see God identifying with the poor and marginal literally ... In all these ways, Jesus identifies with the millions of nameless people who have been wrongfully imprisoned, robbed of their possessions, tortured, and slaughtered.[129]

In such paragraphs, Keller is reading first-century gospels through his own twenty-first-century lens.[130] The Bible does not present the incarnation as moving in with the poor. Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.[131] The Son of God assumed human nature and came to his own people, rich and poor, because they were sinners.[132] Without a doubt, his humiliation included his poverty.[133] He experienced all the temptations that befall his people. He did this in order to save sinners. Our Lord ate with tax collectors and sinners (as in Matthew 9:10–13) not because he was concerned to rectify their social ostracization, but because he came to call 'sinners to repentance'. In fact, Jesus also ate in the homes of Pharisees.[134] The crucifixion was not about Christ associating with victims of injustice: he was numbered *with the transgressors* and made an atonement for the sheep, those whom God had chosen and given to him before the foundation of the world.[135] When Keller focuses on poverty and injustice, he distorts the incarnation

and crucifixion, and takes us away from the purpose of both—which was to save sinners—and leads us into the byway of social transformation.[136] He is leading us to concentrate on the wrong goal.[137]

The Great Commission

The church's mission ought not to be in doubt because Christ has authoritatively commissioned it.[138] He clearly commanded his disciples to preach the gospel to every person,[139] to teach the nations and make them disciples,[140] to go and testify of all that they had witnessed during the earthly ministry of Christ,[141] to cast wide the net of the gospel and to supply spiritual food to the sheep.[142] The Apostle Paul was called separately, but to the same task: Christ commissioned Paul to bear his name before Gentiles, kings, and the children of Israel.[143] He understood his own appointment to be that of a preacher.[144] He was 'separated' to that task and refused to be diverted,[145] except to 'remember the poor'[146] (not a reference to a general social ministry, but a very specific collection among the Gentile churches for the saints in Jerusalem and Judea). Paul considered preaching the gospel to be an inescapable obligation: 'Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!'[147]

We see in Acts and in the New Testament letters how the apostles of Christ carried out his commission, going into the world to preach the gospel.[148] The same is true of those who were scattered in the first persecution: they 'went everywhere preaching the word'.[149] The apostles commissioned others to do the same.[150] Timothy, Titus, Silas, and all the unnamed pastors and teachers in every church, were commissioned to preach and teach the whole counsel of God. The church was the pillar and ground of the truth.[151] Christ had entrusted to

the church the faith once for all delivered to the saints and the gifts to preach it.

The church and its ministers did not seek to transform the culture by direct social action. Paul, for instance, made no attempt to abolish slavery.[152] He taught believing slaves to serve their masters willingly.[153] He did not ask believers to liberate their slaves. He returned Onesimus to his master, Philemon.[154] The apostles did not seek political change. They simply urged the church to pray for those in authority.[155] This was remarkable, to pray for such as Nero and Felix.[156] What was their prayer? It was that these governing authorities might carry out their God-given task of promoting a just society at peace, which would be conducive to the progress of the gospel.

We can anticipate an objection from history. Are we advocating then that William Wilberforce's campaign against slavery should not have taken place? Of course not. But we are pointing out that Wilberforce was a politician, not a pastor; he was not the church, but a Christian man. It is certainly within the scope of Christian men, especially those who sit in parliament, to work actively for social justice. And then, we have the case of William Carey. In 1803, the brutal Hindu practice of religious murder came to the attention of Lord Wellesley. 'Childless wives were taught to vow to the sacred river [Ganges] that if she would grant them children, they would give one back in solemn sacrifice. In due time many would return mournfully to execute their vow. The doomed infants were pushed down the mud banks, either to drown or to be devoured by crocodiles and sharks.'[157] This is what Carey wrote: 'As teacher in Bengali, I have received an order from the Vice-President to make every possible enquiry into the number, nature and reasons of these murders, and to make a full report to the Government.' Simply

notice that Carey was acting under instructions, in his capacity as an employed teacher, not a missionary, and that the action to put a stop to such vile practices was taken by the government, not the church.

Confidence in the Gospel

The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.[158] As long as we believe this, we shall have the courage to devote all our energies to the single task of proclaiming the gospel. The power lies with God and therefore preaching must be preceded, accompanied, and followed by prayer. The preacher is merely a 'clay container' and preaching appears to be such a weak and ineffective method. But God clothes it with power by his Holy Spirit. He assures us that his Word will not return to him empty, but it will accomplish what he pleases.[159] By using such weak means, God makes it evident that the power is his, and so the glory is his.[160]

When preachers come under pressure to show results, to boast of numbers, then they can be tempted to doubt the sufficiency of preaching and to devise new methods to supplement it. The cry goes up, 'We need new and relevant ways of reaching our own age! In our technological age with its wordless communications, who can listen to sermons?'[161] However well-intentioned, this amounts to simple disbelief in God's promised blessing upon his chosen means. Moreover, if we allow ourselves to be diverted from preaching to social action, we shall inevitably dilute our devotion to the principal task. This error is seen in its fullest development in liberalism. When a liberal abandons the Word of God, he has nothing left but his own reason; when he abandons the preaching of the Word, he has nothing left but social activism.[162] But the

just shall live by faith.[163] If we see no results, we continue obediently with the work and we wait until it pleases the Lord to give results. Some plant, others water, and others again bring home the harvest. The kingdom of God advances in secret, imperceptibly, and in his own time.

Keller has admitted that the social change agenda is substantial. It can totally absorb a church's energies. It can overwhelm us. Even a very good and commendable project can distract the church from its commission. It can also give the world a wrong view of what to expect from the church. Whenever the church is drawn into a narrow concentration on one issue, it loses its balance and the breadth of the whole counsel of God.

Conclusion

How shall we respond to Keller's doctrine of the church's mission? We must reject it for several reasons:

(1) He fails to establish his case on the basis of Scripture. This happens because his handling of Scripture is defective. He approaches the text with a predetermined agenda that distorts his interpretation. For example, his interpretation of Christ's mission is skewed from the spiritual and eternal plane to the temporal and social plane.

(2) He focuses too narrowly on the problem of material poverty and thereby takes away from a concentration on the deeper spiritual plight of man, which is what the church is really to address.

(3) He has misunderstood the Mosaic Law and has taught an unbiblical concept of wealth redistribution—and that on the basis of texts which actually preserve ownership of property.

(4) He has failed to observe proper distinctions between the spheres of church and state and between the Christian and the

church (members and the body). As a result, the dual-track mission that he advocates lacks the authority and wisdom of Christ. It also conceals some real dangers for the church. For example, if the church accepts the second track—of activism in the cause of social justice and so on—it will find itself overburdened. Even modest social tasks can soak up the energies of a congregation. But it will also find its concentration on preaching the gospel and personal witnessing becomes diluted. And when the gospel message is preached, it will be set in an unbalanced framework. It is a concern that some of the actions advocated will lead the church on a collision course with the authorities of the state. At the very least, the church will be teaching the surrounding society to look to it for those things that it has not been called to deliver. Expressing this in the style of elenctic theology (denial, affirmation and distinction), we *deny* that the church has a dual mission; we *affirm* that the Christian should exercise love and mercy in all his relationships; we *distinguish* between the commission given to the body and the commission given to the member; and we *distinguish* between the church's role and the state's.

We therefore encourage the believer to live to the full the Christian life, and to do good to all men, especially those who are of the household of faith. We encourage the church to preach the gospel to every person and to stand before kings with the truth. Its ministers must give themselves to the Word of God and prayer. The most effective means of changing society is indirect—by means of the Word of God and prayer.[164]

Endnotes

1. 'Occupy Wall Street' was a protest movement against capitalism, which it regarded as social injustice. See Andy Coghlan and Debora MacKenzie, 'The Hard Core of Power, Global Capitalism', *New Scientist*, 22 October 2011, pp. 8–9.

2. R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), pp. 21–25.
3. It is important to be clear: the protest was not directed at St Paul's or any part of the church. The camp was there simply because that was where the police halted their march. Ironically, when the bailiffs moved in to clear the camp at the end of February 2012, the church expressed regret over the action.
4. We are thankful for the recent appearance of Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church: Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2011). However, within many parts of the church, the answer has already been given and the course set. K. Deddens and M. K. Drost, *Balance of Ecumenism* (Winnipeg: Premier, 1989) traces the swing to the social gospel in the context of the ecumenical movement. See also Alec R. Vidler, *The Church in an Age of Revolution* (The Pelican History of the Church, volume 5; London: Penguin, 1961), pp. 246ff.
5. Redeemer Presbyterian Church's website: www.redeemer.com (accessed 16 August 2011).
6. http://mission-net.org/sites/default/files/missional_manifesto_engl._1106.pdf (accessed 14 May 2013).
7. *Center Church*, p. 14.
8. Not that he is the first to do so; see John Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (American edition; Downers Grove: IVP, 2008); Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret. An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (revised edition; London: SPCK, 1995).
9. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards,* ed. Sereno Dwight, revised Edward Hickman, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974; first published 1834), pp. 163–173; *Generous Justice,* p. 4.
10. *Generous Justice*, pp. 12–13.
11. *Generous Justice*, pp. 114–115.
12. *Generous Justice,* pp. 115–116 (italics mine).
13. Edmund Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1995), p. 117.
14. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?*, pp. 17–20; Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, p. 48.
15. Gen. 14:19.
16. Num. 9:15–23.
17. 2 Sam. 5:19; contrast 1 Chr. 10:14.
18. Num. 1:50–51; 2 Chron. 26: 18; Heb. 5: 4; cf. Deut. 18: 1–14; Exod. 28: 41; 40: 12–15.
19. 2 Chr. 26:16–21.
20. Rom. 10:14–17.
21. John 14:10; Heb. 5:5; 1:5.
22. John 6:15; Matt. 4:8–10.
23. John 6:38. Compare John 4:34; 5:19.
24. Luke 12:14; cf., 1 Cor. 5:12.
25. Gen. 1:26–28; 2:18–25; Matt. 19:3–9.
26. Gen. 11:1–9; Deut. 32:8.
27. Gen. 3:15. See Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, pp. 36–40.
28. 1 Cor. 11:3; Eph. 5:22–32; 1 Peter 3:1–7.

29. Ps. 2; 96:10; Isa. 40:21–24; Dan. 2:21; 4:1–37; 5:22–31; 6:25–27; Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Peter 2:17; Rev. 19:16.
30. Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 3; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Peter 5:1–5.
31. Rom. 13:1–7; 1 Tim. 2:1–2.
32. WCF 31:5.
33. Neil A. Macleod, 'Church and State', in *Hold Fast Your Confession,* ed., D. Macleod (Edinburgh: The Knox Press, 1978), p. 53. Macleod acknowledges his source as James Walker, *Scottish Theology and Theologians,* pp.143–4.
34. Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic,* 3rd edition (London: Macmillan, 1968), pp. 80–83; C. L. Hamblin, *Fallacies* (London: Methuen, 1970), pp. 18–22.
35. John Stott blurs the distinction when he proposes three areas of responsibility for mission: the vocational, the local (church), and the national scene. No sooner does he begin to speak about the local church than he slides from it to the Christian's personal vocation again. *Christian Mission in the Modern World,* pp. 51–52.
36. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ,* pp. 126–131.
37. John 1:18; Heb. 1:2–3.
38. In fact, Stott builds his case for the church's social service substantially upon his interpretation of John 17:18 and 20:21, which is that the Son sends his disciples (all) *in the same way and for the same work* as the Father sent him, the Son. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World,* pp.37–40.
39. Clarence Bouwman, *The Overflowing Riches of My God. Revisiting the Belgic Confession* (Winnipeg: Premier, 2008) pp. 390–1.
40. Generous Justice, pp. 115ff.
41. Generous Justice, p. ix.
42. Luke 4:17–18, quoting Isa. 61:1.
43. Isa. 42:1–7.
44. Generous Justice, pp. 3–18.
45. Generous Justice, p. 14.
46. Mark 6:16–29.
47. Luke 12:13–15.
48. 2 Sam. 7:12–13; 23:1–7; Ps. 72:2, 4, 12–13.
49. John 18:36.
50. Luke 17:21.
51. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah,* tr. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993 reprint), vol. 3, pp. 286–7.
52. Luke 13:18–21.
53. Matt. 5:3–5; John 8:34–36; 9:39. See also Eph.4:18; 2 Cor. 3:14; 4:4; 2 Peter 1:9; 1 John 2:11; Rev. 3:17. Note that the term 'poor' (Hebrew *'ānāw*) in Isaiah 61:1 refers to the heart and some have rendered it 'meek'.
54. John 2:11.
55. 2 Peter 3:13; Rev. 6:11; 11:15; 21:27.
56. 'Passion' is Keller's term: *Generous Justice,* p. xiv.
57. *Generous Justice,* p. 11. He quotes Job 29:12–17 and 31:13–28.
58. *Generous Justice,* p. 12.
59. *Generous Justice,* pp. 12–13.
60. Deut. 21:19; 22:15; 25:7; Josh. 20:4; Ruth 4:11; Lam. 5:14.
61. Job 29:7–9, 25.

62. Rom. 13:1–4.
63. Matt. 5:38–42.
64. Prov. 31:8–9.
65. Jer. 22:2–3.
66. *Generous Justice,* p. 19, pp. 41ff.
67. *Generous Justice,* chapter 1. Micah 6: 8; Zech. 7:10–11; Ezek. 18:5, 7–8a.
68. Deut. 10:18–19; Ps. 146:7–9; Jer. 9:23–24.
69. Rom. 2:11–16.
70. For example: Isa. 13–24; Amos 1–2; Jonah; Nahum.
71. Deut. 4:5–7; 1 Kings 10:1–10; Ps. 147:19–20; Rom. 3: 1–2.
72. Deut. 8:28. We must be careful not to think, however, that God's promises and blessings to Israel were only temporal. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), vol. 1, 2:10–11 reminds us that the promises to Israel were substantially the same as those to the New Testament people of God.
73. Gen. 24:35.
74. Joel Beeke and Ray Pennings, 'Calvin the Revolutionary: Christian Living in a Fallen World', *Calvin, Theologian and Reformer,* ed. Joel R. Beeke and Garry J. Williams (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), p. 113.
75. Num. 18:20–28; Deut. 12:6–19; Neh. 10:35–39; 12:44; 13:10–14.
76. Ruth 1:16–17; 2:12.
77. Prov. 13:4; 20:4.
78. Eccles. 5:8.
79. Lev. 26:14ff; Deut. 28:15ff; Joel; Mal. 3:8–12.
80. Amos 4:6–8.
81. Deut. 14:22–29; 26:12–15.
82. Lev. 19:9–10; Deut. 24:19–22.
83. Lev. 25.
84. *Ministries of Mercy. The Call of the Jericho Road,* 2nd ed., pp.80ff also sets out the same thinking; and *Gospel in Life Study Guide,* Session 1, pp. 7–30, shows why Keller places a focus on the city.
85. Matt.10:9–15; Luke 8:1–3; 1 Cor. 9:1–14; 1 Tim. 5:17–18.
86. Acts 6:1–7; 1 Tim. 5:3–16.
87. Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–37; 11:27–30; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; 2 Cor. 8–9.
88. Acts 4:34.
89. 1 Tim. 5:3–4, 9–12.
90. Deut. 12:12, 18; 14:27–29; 15:7; 16:11, 14; 17:2, 8; 24:14; 26:12; 31:12; Ps. 147:13; Isa. 60:18.
91. *Generous Justice,* p. 4.
92. They have 'sojourner' (ESV), 'stranger' (KJV, NASB), 'alien' (NKJV, NAB, NRSV), and 'foreigner' (NIV).
93. 3 John 1:5–8.
94. Heb. 13:1–3; Matt. 25:41–46.
95. Deut. 23:19–20.
96. Deut. 15:1–4.
97. *Generous Justice,* p. 21.
98. *Generous Justice,* p. 28, quoting Craig Blomberg.

99. *Generous Justice*, p. 29.
100. Num. 36:7.
101. 1 Kings 21.
102. Lev. 25:42.
103. Isa. 5:8.
104. Acts 5:4.
105. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, p. 151.
106. WCF 26:3.
107. Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), p. 323.
108. Rom. 13:6; 1 Sam. 8:11–18.
109. *Generous Justice*, pp. 16–17.
110. 2 Cor. 8:8.
111. Deut. 15:14; Prov. 11:25; 22: 9; Eccles. 11:1–2; Rom. 12:8, 13; 1 Cor.16:2–3; 2 Cor. 9:13.
112. James 2:15–17; 1 John 3:16–19.
113. Gal. 6:10.
114. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ,* p.150. Johannes G. Vos, *The Westminster Larger Catechism. A Commentary,* ed., G. I. Williamson (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002, originally 1946–49), pp. 378–380.
115. Matt. 13:8, 23; 19:28.
116. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ*, pp.36–40.
117. I, p. 135.
118. Rom. 12:3–8; 1 Tim. 5:17–25.
119. Acts 20:28.
120. 1 Peter 5:1–3.
121. 1 Cor. 5:12.
122. *Generous Justice*, p. 145. James E. McGoldrick, *Abraham Kuyper, God's Renaissance Man* (Darlington: Evangelical Press, 2000), pp. 158ff.
123. *Generous Justice*, pp. 145–6.
124. *Center Church*, p. 274.
125. Keller, *Center Church,* p. 175.
126. The G8 consists of Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom and United States of America (with the European Union also represented). +5 refers to the five largest emerging economies: Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa.
127. Matt. 6:32; Luke 12:30.
128. *Generous Justice*, p. 44.
129. *Generous Justice*, pp. 185–6.
130. Sexism was not the issue in John 4:27 and racism was not the issue in Luke 10:26ff. It is highly debatable that we should use the term sexism at all. Jesus agreed with male headship and was not speaking with her to lift her social position but to lead her, a sinner, into everlasting life. On several occasions, he also affirmed racial barriers: John 4:22; Matt.15:21–28. Jesus' earthly ministry took place before the point in history when the message of salvation was sent throughout the world (Acts 1–2). Modern racism is to be rejected in the church on the grounds of Christian love.

131. 1 Tim. 1:1-5; Matt. 9:13.
132. John 1:1–3, 9–11; Heb. 2:10–18.
133. 2 Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:1–11; Luke 9:58.
134. Luke 7:36; 14:1.
135. In that sense, with the perpetrators of injustice rather than the victims of it.
136. In fact, the distortion does not stop with the crucifixion. The same error is encountered in Keller's comment about the day of Pentecost: 'At Pentecost the first gospel preaching was in every language, showing that no one culture is *the* 'right' culture' (*Generous Justice,* p. 122). This is not at all what Pentecost shows. It is the signal of the gospel being sent out to the nations.
137. *Generous Justice,* p. 177: 'when we concentrate on and meet the needs of the poor'.
138. 'All authority', Matt. 28:18–20; 'declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness', Rom. 1:4; Ps. 110; Rev. 5.
139. Mark 16:15. DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church?* p. 47, omit this text on the basis of textual criticism; but it has been retained in the main English versions and defended by Dean John William Burgon, *The Last Twelve Verses of Mark Vindicated Against Recent Critical Objections & Established* (Oxford & London: James Parker, 1871).
140. Matt. 28:18–20.
141. Luke 24:48–49; Acts 1:7–8.
142. John 20:21–23; 21:1–19. The narrative of John 21:1–14 no doubt was another reminder of Christ's deity, but also of his preaching and his call to them to be fishers of men: Matt. 4:17–20; Luke 5:1–11.
143. Acts 9:15; 26:16–18.
144. 1 Tim. 2:7; 2 Tim. 1:11.
145. Rom. 1:1, 15–17; 1 Cor. 1:17. This must be read in context: Paul did baptize, but he is rejecting the idea that he is gathering *his own* pupils. This verse illustrates his single-minded attention to the gospel.
146. Gal. 2:10; 1 Cor. 16:1–4; Acts 11:27–30; Rom. 15:25–27.
147. 1 Cor. 9:16.
148. Matt. 24:14.
149. Acts 8:4.
150. Eph. 4:7–16; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2:1–3; 3:14–17; 4:1–5; Titus 1:9.
151. 1 Tim. 3:15; Jude 1:3; 1 John 2:21; 2 Peter 3:15–18. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ,* pp. 102–108, speaks of the church as conveyor, custodian, interpreter and proclaimer of the truth, and in pp. 126–131 speaks of the universal office of believers before dealing with the special offices.
152. 1 Cor. 7:20–21.
153. Eph. 6:5–9; Col. 3:22–25.
154. Philem. 1: 12.
155. 1 Tim. 2:1–5. See also Rom.13:1–7 and 1 Peter 2:11–17; 3:13–17; 4:12–19.
156. E.g., Acts 18:12–17; 24:27.
157. S. Pearce Carey, *William Carey* (London: Wakeman, 1993), p. 212.
158. Rom. 1:16–17.
159. Isa. 55:10–11.
160. 2 Cor. 4:7; 1 Cor. 1:18–4:21.

161. This is an issue very much to the fore in the International Conference of Reformed Churches and also among the European members of that conference, the EuCRC.
162. Keller recognizes this: *Generous Justice,* pp. xii–xiii.
163. Hab. 2:4.
164. In a world that feels the curse, Jesus Christ is the source of all blessing (Gen. 3:14–19), the seed of promise in whom all the nations of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 22:18). He is the one who was made a curse so that we who believe might receive the blessing promised to Abraham (Gal. 3:13–14). By his blood, all the sins of his people are forgiven (Heb. 8–10). He is the beloved Son in whom God is well-pleased, and whose obedience merits all blessing (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Rom. 5:12–21). It is in Christ that God has blessed his people with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph. 1:3–14). He did not come to redistribute material wealth, but to grant us eternal treasure in heaven that defies valuation.

Timothy Keller's Hermeneutic: an example for the church to follow?

Richard Holst

Introduction

Dr. Keller is rightly acclaimed as an effective communicator. His style is persuasive and rhetorically accomplished; to read him is almost to hear him. In this, Keller follows perfectly his model C. S. Lewis's advice: 'Always write (and read) with the ear, not the eye. You should hear every sentence you write as if it was being read aloud or spoken.'[1] Not many Christian authors have managed to follow Lewis's advice, but Keller is a welcome exception. The church needs more able communicators and we would all do well to emulate him in this regard.

However, the minister's task consists of more than effective communication. When Paul summed up the nature of the Christian ministry, he did so in terms of being a faithful steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1–2; 9:17; Col. 1:23–25). If this is the case—that we are ultimately to be measured by

the faithfulness of what we communicate rather than the effectiveness of how we do it—then our primary concern must always remain the sound interpretation of Scripture.

Our work as biblical interpreters is indeed at the core of what we do. The preacher or author must therefore undergird his end conclusions with careful work done in the study, and provide a sufficient sampling of this work to enable the audience to recognize that he is teaching God's truth rather than his own opinions. While it is true that we need not exhibit all of our exegetical spadework in every sentence, our audience needs to be assured that our conclusions are well-founded. In order to do this, moreover, our exegesis must be in accordance with accepted hermeneutic principles. This is how we validate conclusions in Christian discourse.

In this regard—as a demonstration of good hermeneutical practice—it is less certain that Keller's work provides us with the best of examples to follow.[2] Just to be clear, there is no question as to whether his works are intended to convey the contents of the Bible; it is obvious that this is his desire. Nor is it a question as to whether Keller gets it right more often than he gets it wrong in his exegesis. The question is to what extent Keller *consistently* adheres to good hermeneutic practice in his writing and, in particular, whether the church should consider his work as a *model* to emulate.

We would not want to give the impression that we are quibbling with Keller over debatable matters, so we shall begin by looking at our hermeneutical norm. It is sometimes assumed that hermeneutics is itself a nebulous pursuit to be governed more by personal opinion than by acknowledged standards. Such an approach to the Bible would be nearly as disastrous as rejecting it outright. Thankfully, Scripture itself informs us

how we are to read it. Moreover, these principles have been clearly articulated in the confessional documents of the orthodox tradition. The particular statement of hermeneutic practice that will guide our discussion will be that of the Westminster Standards, particularly the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and the section 'Of the Preaching of the Word' in the *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (DPW).

The Westminster Hermeneutic

A Reformed position on hermeneutics may well be defined as the Westminster position on hermeneutics.[3] The fundamental principle advanced by the Divines is that Scripture is its own interpreter. At a time when it is *de rigueur* to come at the Bible from a position somewhere on the outside, the proposition that 'The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself' (WCF 1:9) provides a much-needed corrective. This means, among other things, that extra-biblical sources may never control our interpretation. Whatever insights disciplines such as social anthropology, literary theory, second temple Judaism and discourse analysis might offer, none of these things should ever be made the key to understanding Scripture.

This fundamental principle also means that, where there is a question about the true and full sense of Scripture, we employ as our basic tool the *analogia scripturae* (analogy of Scripture). In other words, inspired Scripture acts as its own interpretive guide. The Confession acknowledges that 'All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all' (WCF 1:7); there will be occasions when the right understanding of a passage is not immediately obvious. However, such things

may 'be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly' (WCF 1:9).

While this is a wonderfully simple principle, it is certainly not simplistic. Comparing texts requires understanding of their doctrinal content and didactic import. That is why the *analogia scripturae* is virtually synonymous with a Protestant understanding of the *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith): the ability to rightly interpret Scripture is predicated upon a firm grasp of the scriptural *faith*.

So we are never left merely to speculation or to our own private opinions with regard to understanding what Scripture actually teaches. Furthermore, when texts do not speak directly to a point, we apply the principle of necessary inference: 'The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture' (WCF 1:6). The Westminster Assembly took great care to safeguard the interpretive method so as to avoid, on the one hand, specious exegesis and, on the other, the ever-present threat of *eisegesis* (reading into the text). The former is the result of superficial comparisons, and the latter the product of hermeneutical predispositions.

There is, of course, room for exegetical differences. The Assembly was not itself hermeneutically monolithic; the Divines recognized this when they acknowledged that Scripture is not alike in all places 'plain'. But they were concerned to keep exploration and debate within the boundaries of the agreed system and distillation of doctrine which became the doctrinal standard and tradition of English-speaking Reformed churches. A confessional hermeneutic provides an essential safeguard against exegetical, hermeneutical and doctrinal aberration,

while providing a safe environment for exploration and discussion.

As Reformed people, we should not be afraid of these parameters. We should embrace them as the safe and sure guide that they are. Nor should we succumb to the anachronistic sentiment that, because the Assembly failed to address all of today's issues, we need to break the mould and kick over the traces. At the basic level, 'there is nothing new under the sun' (Eccles. 1:9), and in many cases new errors prove simply to be restatements of old heresies which the Divines knew about. As for the few cases that remain, this is why some Presbyterian churches have modified the confession at some point in their history. After nearly four centuries, however, such modifications remain remarkably few and minor, evidence not of the church's inactivity but of the Confession's adequacy. To the extent that it is an accurate and comprehensive summary of biblical doctrine, it remains as valid throughout time and place as Scripture itself. To borrow an expression from current hermeneutical theory, the Confession sets forth 'supra-cultural' truth and principles. This is certainly the case with regard to the hermeneutical method it teaches.

The point of this preamble is that successful exegesis is a matter neither of intuition nor of personal predisposition, but of sound principle and correct method. There is an objective standard for interpreting Scripture, and this standard can be taught. That does not mean that there are not obstacles to overcome. Seminarians learning exegesis for the first time are often as unaware of their own hermeneutical 'baggage' as they are of the proper hermeneutic method they have come to seminary to learn. Unaware of this baggage, they fail to appreciate the historical and linguistic distance between them and the

text, with the usual result of reading their own experience into it. The remedy is to be able to distance ourselves ('distanciation'), which helps us get to grips with our personal hermeneutical predispositions and to combat the common problem of *eisegesis* or reading meaning into the text. Likewise we must be aware of the problem of superficial comparison, the idea that because texts are similar-looking or similar-sounding they necessarily speak to the same point.

Left unchecked, however, such weaknesses may produce an exercise not in exegesis but in distraction and suggestion. Instead of sound hermeneutics bringing our audience slowly but inexorably to the truth, we may end up convincing them through the illusory appearance of biblical warrant. It goes without saying that such should never be a substitute for careful exegesis carried on according to right principles.

The *Directory of Publick Worship* summarizes the principles of hermeneutics in the following way:

> In raising doctrines from the text, his [the preacher's] care ought to be, *First*, That the matter be the truth of God. *Secondly*, That it be a truth contained in or grounded on that text, that the hearers may discern how God teacheth it from thence. *Thirdly*, That he chiefly insist upon those doctrines which are principally intended, and make most for the edification of the hearers.

The first of these criteria—that our concern must be to teach the truth of God—is hugely important, but it is difficult to evaluate in isolation. We shall therefore focus on the second and third elements mentioned, along with the element of 'good and necessary consequence' taken from the Confession itself (WCF 1:6). Thus we shall keep in mind the following questions:

Do the interpretations represent the truth that is *chiefly taught* in that place? Are the *clearer parts* of Scripture used to interpret the less clear? And finally, are the deductions from Scripture *good and necessary consequences*?

Is Keller a good contemporary example of this Reformed methodology? As we examine examples of Keller's demonstrated hermeneutic, we shall be looking at three potential problem areas in Keller's writing:

(1) the *use of parables* as the main warrant for what is being taught or as the interpretive lens for the exegesis of other texts. This would be an apparent reversal of the principle that the clearer parts of Scripture should interpret the less clear (WCF 1:9).

(2) the *use of secondary aspects* in the text as the main warrant for what is being taught. This would be an apparent violation of the principle that we should 'chiefly insist upon those doctrines which are principally intended' (DPW) in any given text.

(3) the *use of logical fallacies* in exegesis. This would be an apparent violation of the principle that what we teach 'is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture' (WCF 1:6).

Again, we do not suggest that Keller falls into these problems intentionally, nor do we imagine that he is the only teacher to have fallen foul of them in the history of the church. Rather, the question is simply whether he should be held up as a contemporary example of how the church ought to be interpreting Scripture.

We consider first Keller's use of parables.

1. Use of Parables

In general terms, the right exegesis of parables is a challenging business. Clearer parts of Scripture should interpret the less clear, and parables are certainly in the latter category. Jesus' disciples are routinely unable to understand the meaning of the parables until they are explained to them, and for good reason. Christ tells them, 'To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables …' (Luke 8:10). In other words, as they stand alone, parables are *intended* to be ambiguous. Thus, the only safe way to understand a parable is to pay close attention to the inspired interpretation that is usually given in the passage itself, and then by clearer texts elsewhere.

Some of Keller's distinctive contributions are based upon parables. The most famous example would be *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, Keller's paradigm-shifting take on the prodigal son. In the introduction, Keller explains what particularly led him to write on the subject:

> I almost felt I had discovered the secret heart of Christianity. Over the years I have often returned to teach and counsel from the parable. I have seen more people encouraged, enlightened, and helped by this passage, when I explained the true meaning of it, than by any other text.[4]

This all sounds rather exciting—'I almost felt I had discovered the secret heart of Christianity.' However, for those who are familiar with the history of the interpretation of this particular parable, the excitement is tempered with a degree of concern. The parable of the Prodigal Son was used as the main proof text for the principal doctrine of Liberalism, the universal

spiritual fatherhood of God.[5] More recently, a bishop who rejected even the idea of a personal God used this parable to support his thesis that salvation consists in psychological integration.[6] If there is something about this particular parable that makes it so attractive a pretext for false theology, then it is only sensible that we think twice about new discoveries in it that promise to revolutionize our understanding of the Christian faith.

With that cautionary note in mind, we consider how Keller chooses to use this parable in *The Prodigal God*. The problem is in the very design of the book, which is to use this parable as a lens to understand everything else:

> I am turning to this familiar story, found in the fifteenth chapter of the gospel of St. Luke, in order to get to the heart of the Christian faith. [...] I will demonstrate how the story helps us to understand the Bible as a whole.[7]

We have already seen that, according to Christ himself, parables are intentionally obscure. In the words of the Westminster Confession, 'when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly' (WCF 1:9). This being the case, one could hardly conceive of a concept more contrary to good hermeneutical procedure than to use a parable to define the Christian faith and, thereafter, to understand the rest of Scripture in this light. If in the course of his exposition Keller somehow manages to keep from error after turning the core tenet of interpretive practice completely on its head, he has still set a monumentally bad example.

Another example of Keller's use of parables comes from his discussion of hell in *The Reason for God: Belief in An Age of Skepticism*. Although he quotes extensively from C. S. Lewis, Keller recognizes the need to show that this teaching—a self-chosen hell that God does not send people to, where people do not really want to leave, and in which the punishment comes primarily in the form of psychological disintegration—is to be found in Scripture.[8] The passage chosen for this daunting task is the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16.

From the outset, Keller's procedure is highly problematic. The main biblical warrant for a given doctrine should not come from a parable. If other passages taught this doctrine, then the primary exegetical support should have come from them. If, on the other hand, Keller could not find clear support from among the scores of non-parabolic passages that speak about hell, then perhaps this should have been taken as a cautionary note. Once again, if Keller can somehow manage to stay away from serious problems after adopting such an ill-advised procedure, it will not be because he has exemplified the very best in hermeneutical practice.

To make matters worse, Keller then places great stress on certain aspects of the parable while largely ignoring others. We shall quote him at length:

> Jesus's parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man in Luke 16 supports the view of hell we are presenting here. Lazarus is a poor man who begs at the gate of a cruel rich man. They both die and Lazarus goes to heaven while the rich man goes to hell. There he looks up and sees Lazarus in heaven 'in Abraham's bosom' [quotes Luke 16:24–31]. What is astonishing is that though their statuses have now been reversed, the rich man seems to be

> blind to what has happened. He still expects Lazarus to be his servant and treats him as his water boy. He does not ask to get out of hell, yet strongly implies that God never gave him and his family enough information about the afterlife. Commentators have noted the astonishing amount of denial, blame-shifting, and spiritual blindness in this soul in hell. They have also noted that the rich man, unlike Lazarus, is never given a personal name. He is only called a 'Rich Man,' strongly hinting that since he had built his identity on his wealth rather than on God, once he lost his wealth he lost any sense of a self.[9]

Let us just briefly note the points that Keller chooses to make: the rich man has lost touch with reality, he has lost his sense of self and he does not ask to get out of hell. The first is probably true, the second is an interesting but debatable point, and the third is a rather egregious argument from silence (that the rich man does not *want* to leave hell).

Now let us mention a couple of things that Keller passes over. First, the statements, 'And being in torments in Hades' and 'for I am tormented in this flame' (Luke 16:23–24) would seem to be good candidates to explain the nature (traditional hellfire) and source (imposed by God) of the rich man's suffering in hell. Second, the 'great gulf fixed' (Luke 16:26) would seem a better explanation for why the rich man cannot leave rather than the suggestion that he does not *want* to. It would appear that the only way that Keller can make this passage fit C. S. Lewis' idea of hell is by imposing a highly selective grid upon it. However, such expedients are only to be expected when parables are used in ways that are flatly contrary to the standards of Reformed hermeneutics.

2. Use of Secondary Aspects

The second area of concern is Keller's use of secondary aspects of the text as the main warrant for what he wishes to teach, an apparent violation of the principle that we should 'chiefly insist upon those doctrines which are principally intended' in any given text. One example of this would be Keller's interpretation of the incident with Miriam in Numbers 12: 'Between the promise of Genesis 12 and its fulfillment in Revelation, the Bible strikes numerous blows against racism. Moses's sister Miriam was punished by God because she rejected Moses's African wife on account of her race (Numbers 12).'[10] Someone who was not familiar with this part of the Old Testament would probably suppose that if they turned to Numbers 12 they would find a statement explaining how God punished Miriam for her racism. Yet this is not at all what we find.

The passage begins with the statement 'Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman.' (Num. 12:1) Taken in complete isolation, it is theoretically possible that Aaron and Miriam were motivated by racism. However, read in light of the larger context, it is far more likely that they were accusing Moses of violating the divine prohibition against intermarriage with the pagans (Deut. 7:1–4; Ex. 34:11–16).

In any case, Keller's statement is not about Miriam's motivation but about God's reason for punishing her—'Miriam was punished by God because she rejected Moses's African wife on account of her race (Numbers 12).' However, this is certainly not the explanation that God Himself gives us:

> Then he said, 'Hear now my words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the LORD, make myself known to him in a vision; I speak

> to him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings; and he sees the form of the LORD. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?' So the anger of the LORD was aroused against them, and he departed (Num. 12:6–9).

God makes his rationale for rebuking Aaron and Miriam absolutely clear, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with racism. The Lord deemed Moses to be 'faithful in all my house' and had granted him the unprecedented privilege of speaking face to face. In light of this, God asks, 'Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?' Miriam was punished by God not because 'she rejected Moses's African wife on account of her race' but because she disregarded the divinely-ordained authority of Moses. Keller passes on the opportunity to teach what is 'principally intended' by this text—and incidentally, rebellion against legitimate authority seems to be as common a contemporary sin as racism—but instead uses the relative detail of Moses' wife being of another race as the main warrant for something the passage does not teach at all.

Another example of this problem can be seen in Keller's treatment of the establishment of the diaconate in Acts 6:1–7.

> Finally, in Acts 6, after the ministry of *diakonia* is more firmly established, Luke adds: 'So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly' (verse 7). The word 'so' indicates a cause-effect relationship. This sharing of resources across class lines—between the 'needy' and those wealthy enough to have property to sell—was extremely rare in the Greco-Roman

> world. The practical actions of Christians for people in need was therefore striking to observers and made them open to the gospel message.[11]

Based upon such a statement, we might expect to find some material in Acts 6 reporting how the people were amazed by the generosity of the Christians and therefore gave the gospel a hearing. Such reports are commonplace in the Book of Acts; on more than a dozen occasions Luke narrates the people's reaction to significant events along with the specific reason for their reaction.[12] However, in this particular case, we find nothing of the sort.

According the apostles' explanation, the problem is that they were being distracted from their appointed mission: 'It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.' They therefore set up the diaconate with the express purpose that 'we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word'. What follows from this single-minded focus on the means of grace is that 'the word of God spread'. Nothing at all is said about the church's sharing being observed by the outside world, nor that they found it striking, nor that this made them open to the gospel message. The statement 'The practical actions of Christians for people in need was therefore striking to observers and made them open to the gospel message' is a fascinating speculation, but it is patently not exegesis. Keller has again passed up the opportunity to teach what the passage seems primarily to convey—deacons should perform their function so that ministers can focus on prayer and the ministry of the word—and is using a superficial element as warrant for something the passage does not say.

One further example of Keller's sometimes limited attention

to what the text principally intends—or control by clearer texts elsewhere—is found in *Ministries of Mercy*:

> First, there is the question of the *necessity* of mercy to our very existence as Christians. We must not miss the fact that this parable is an answer to the question 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus responds by pointing the law expert to the example of the Good Samaritan, who cared for the physical and economic needs of the man in the road. Bear in mind that Jesus was posed the very same question in Mark 10:17 by the rich young ruler. There, too, Jesus concludes by saying, 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor' (v. 21). It appears that Jesus sees care for the poor as part of the *essence* of being a Christian.'[13]

Keller does not want us to 'miss the fact that the parable [of the Good Samaritan] is an answer to the question, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"' Jesus' initial response was to say, 'What is written in the law?' followed by 'You have answered rightly; do this and you will live' (Luke 10:28). In other words, Jesus was not defining 'the essence of being a Christian' but rather explaining the standards required for justification by works. Both the rich young ruler and the lawyer were attempting to justify themselves through their obedience to the law, and Jesus was disabusing them of their vain pretensions (the second use of the law, WCF 19:6). Keller acknowledges this very point later on in the book, but these things are left unconnected.[14]

In any case, 'care for the poor' unquestionably comes under the heading of law rather than gospel, and no element of our law-keeping could possibly be defined as 'part of the *essence* of being a Christian'.[15] Keller is therefore right to then ask the

question, 'Aren't we saved by faith in Christ alone? Then why does the ministry of mercy appear to be so central to the very definition of a Christian?' Strangely, however, he allows neither this central teaching of the Reformation found throughout Scripture nor his own understanding of the main purpose of the passage to discipline his exegesis, preferring to make the rhetorically powerful statement, 'Jesus sees care for the poor as part of the *essence* of being a Christian.'[16]

3. Logical Fallacies in Exegesis.

Finally, we consider Keller's apparent use of logical fallacies in exegesis. We know that what we teach must be 'either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture' (WCF 1:6). Therefore, we must be careful that any implications we draw from the text are 'a good and necessary consequence' rather than a logical fallacy. However, such care is not always manifested in Keller's work.

One fallacy is shown in Keller's handling of obedience to the law in *The Prodigal God*:

> Do you realize, then, what Jesus is teaching? Neither son loved the father for himself. They both were using the father for their own self-centered ends rather than loving, enjoying, and serving him for his own sake. This means that you can rebel against God and be alienated from him either by breaking his rules *or* by keeping all of them diligently. It's a shocking message: Careful obedience to God's law may serve as a strategy for rebelling against God.[17]

Keller's 'shocking message' is first of all dependent upon the

supposition that the elder brother is intended to be seen as lost, an interpretation that is not self-evident in the context of Luke 15.[18] However, for our purposes here, we will simply go along with this premise in order to point out that this conclusion still rests upon a fallacy. Keller's reasoning goes something like this:

> The older brother claims to have obeyed his father.
> Yet he is alienated from the father.
> Therefore, careful obedience to the law may serve as a strategy for rebellion.

This is not a good inference for two reasons. First, we should know from the story of the rich young ruler that we cannot assume that just because someone *claims* to have followed the law they actually have done so (Matt 19:20).

Second, even if the elder brother has endeavored to keep the law, there is another explanation for why he might be alienated other than his law-keeping. Consider the following argument:

> A man cuts the lawn every week.
> Yet the lawn is brown and dead.
> Therefore, conscientious mowing may serve as a strategy for killing the lawn.

There are, of course, other explanations for why the lawn might have died, such as the fact that it is infested with pests or has never been watered. Likewise, obedience to the law is always good in and of itself, but our relationship with God may yet be fatally undermined for other reasons (Rom 7). Keller surely knows this and could have stated things in a way

that would have accurately conveyed the balanced biblical teaching, but to say that 'Careful obedience to God's law may serve as a strategy for rebelling against God'[19] is exegetically indefensible.

Another relevant instance is found in *Ministries of Mercy*. After references to Romans 8, Psalm 96, C. S. Lewis, and Matthew 5, Keller works from Isaac Watts' hymn 'Joy to the World':

> No more let sins and sorrows grow,
> Nor thorns infest the ground;
> He comes to make his blessings flow
> Far as the curse is found!

The kingdom of God is the means for the renewal of the entire world and all the dimensions of life. From the throne of Jesus Christ flows new life and power such than no disease, decay, poverty, blemish, or pain can stand before it. If this is the ministry of the kingdom—to heal all the results of sin in all the areas of life, then the church must intentionally use its resources to minister in every 'circle.' We are to do not just evangelism but must be a 'full-service' body ... The Kingdom of God is power, God's ruling power present to heal *all* the curse of sin.[20]

First of all, it is inadvisable to derive warrant for adjusting the mission of the church from a hymn, no matter how well known. If Watts is simply paraphrasing Scripture on these points, it would have been better to stick with the actual texts.

The main problem, however, is with the logic of Keller's 'if, then' transition between the future state and his conclusion regarding the church's mission. Christ will certainly return on

the last day to make a new heavens and a new earth in which no trace of the curse remains. Yet it is hardly obvious that this *future* eschatological reality entails that the *present* church militant must therefore 'intentionally use its resources to minister in every "circle"' and 'be a "full-service body"'.[21] Just because we are promised that there will be no curse in the New Heavens and New Earth, this does not mean that the church's mission is to try to get there now, in contradiction of Scriptures that speak clearly on the matter (John 18:36; Matt 28:19–20; Mark 16:15). If our standard is to teach only those things which are either 'expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture' (WCF 1:6), this episode does not provide us with a good example.

Conclusion

The basic question we have raised in this paper is: Do Keller's writings provide us with a consistent example of the Reformed hermeneutical method? More specifically, do his interpretations represent the truth that is 'chiefly taught' in that place? Does he consistently allow the clearer parts of Scripture to interpret the less clear? And are his deductions from Scripture 'good and necessary consequences'? Based on the examples that we have seen, I think the answer would have to be that Keller is not consistent in adhering to these principles. It is true that, were we to look through almost any teacher's work, we would probably dig up some exegetical fallacies. Yet if there is any difference in this case, it would be the relative prominence of his departures from the standard; indeed, some of the distinctive contributions for which Keller is most well known are connected with them. For this reason, we must conclude that his work does not provide us with the best example to follow.

Expounding and applying Scripture is a huge, sometimes crushing, responsibility. It obliges us to demonstrate not just the validity of a certain way of arguing but the consistency of our conclusions with the infallible word of God. Everyone who seeks to sow the seed of that word has a duty to be clear in both understanding and presentation because we have no authority to say anything apart from it. Hermeneutical sleight of hand is ruled out; faithfulness is ruled in. We proceed carefully by means of appropriate exegetical and hermeneutical principles and then proclaim the message passionately, always insisting on 'those doctrines which are principally intended' (DPW). The church should continue to look for and emulate exemplary models of Reformed hermeneutic practice.

Endnotes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Letters* (London: Fount, 1988), p. 485.
2. Bryan Hickey writes 'In this latest work, Keller has been of great worth in showing Christian and non-Christian alike how to go about reading and understanding the scriptures':
http://thechiefend.net/2010/02/the-prodigal-god-hermeneutics-for-the-uninitiated/ (link no longer available).
3. As is widely understood, the Westminster Confession served as the basis for the 1658 Savoy Declaration (Congregationalist) and the 1689 Baptist Confession.
4. *Prodigal God*, p. xiii.
5. See, for example, J. Gresham Machen's discussion in Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 51–53.
6. See John Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1965).
7. *Prodigal God*, pp. xii; xiv.
8. See *Reason for God*, pp. 76–80.
9. *Reason for God*, pp. 77–78.
10. *Generous Justice*, p. 123.
11. *Generous Justice*, pp. 140–141.
12. The Jerusalem pilgrims are amazed because the apostles spoke in their languages (Acts 2:7–13), the people are amazed because of Peter's healing of the man born lame (3:9–11), the people glorify God because of this miraculous healing, (4:21),

fear fell upon those who hear about Ananias and Sapphira (5:11), the people esteem the apostles because of the signs and wonders they perform (5:12–13), Simon astonished the Samaritans because of his magic (8:9), the people are amazed because the persecuting Saul has become a believer (9:21), the people acclaim Herod in order to pacify him (12:20–22), the Lyconians think Paul and Barnabus are gods because they healed a cripple (14:11), the Ephesian mob is confused because most did not know why they had assembled (19:32–34), the people of Jerusalem are stirred up against Paul (21:30–36), become more silent because he spoke to them in Hebrew (22:2), but then become irate when he mentions the Gentiles (21:21–23).

13. *Ministries of Mercy*, pp. 11–12.
14. Keller later correctly states Jesus' purpose: 'He was seeking to confound the law expert with a vision of selfless love so lofty as to be impossible. [...] Jesus' true goal was to show the law expert that as a self-justifier he was *poor* ...' (*Ministries of Mercy*, p. 59) Precisely. Christ is setting an impossible standard in order to show the lawyer the impossibility of self-justification. Why then does Keller think that this vision of *impossible* love is required of us all, without qualification? He says 'by the command "go and do likewise" Jesus commands us to provide shelter, finances, medical care, and friendship to people who lack them. We have nothing less than an order from our Lord in the most categorical of terms. "Go and do likewise!"' (*Ministries of Mercy*, p. 11). The entire thrust of the book depends upon this connection.
15. See Gal. 2:16.
16. *Ministries of Mercy*, p. 12. In general, there would seem to be a persistent tension between rhetorical effect and sound hermeneutics. For instance, Moises Silva suggests that '... much allegorical exposition arises from the need for rhetorical effect ... to the extent that the congregation learns thereby to look for "hidden" meanings in the text, to that extent the text is either subjected to greater distortions or else is removed from the common believer who is unable to produce exegetical surprises' (Moises Silva, 'Towards a Definition of Allegory', in *Has the Church Misread the Bible?* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], p. 56).
17. *Prodigal God*, pp. 36–37.
18. In keeping with the theme established from the introduction and the first two parables in Luke 15, one might argue that the more natural reading is that only one of the two sons was lost.
19. *Prodigal God*, p. 37. Keller actually phrases things slightly more carefully when he is *not* directly interpreting this text: 'You can reject God by rejecting his law and living any way you see fit. And you can reject God by embracing and obeying God's law *so as to earn your salvation*' (*Center Church*, p. 63; italics added).
20. *Ministries of Mercy*, pp. 52, 53 (italics added).
21. Keller elsewhere marshals texts—Luke 17:20–21 shows that the kingdom is *already* present and John 3:5 emphasizes that the kingdom is entered *now* through the new birth—but does not sufficiently address the all-important question of how 'the kingdom' is to be defined in these texts. See also chapter 4.

'Not Quite' Theistic Evolution: does Tim Keller bridge the gap between creation and evolution?[1]

William M. Schweitzer

Tim Keller's goal for his apologetic work is to render the Christian faith relevant to contemporary people. This is an ambitious but unavoidably risky business. The potential benefits are great because, if he gets everything right, biblical Christianity will be rendered intellectually tenable to a new generation. Yet there is little doubt that there are major risks involved. Keller must somehow defuse all the main objections to Christian teaching while remaining absolutely faithful to the whole counsel of God in Scripture. Upholding both of these things with equal care has not proven easy in the history of theology.

One of the major obstacles to faith that Keller identifies is the conflict between the doctrine of creation and the theory of evolution.[2] From Keller's perspective, this is particularly sad because it is unnecessary—the appearance of a war between

these camps is largely media-driven, based on misunderstandings, and ultimately proves to be only apparent.[3] In response to this problem, Keller tries to set things straight in his own writing and by championing a New York organization that was created for the very purpose of reconciling Christians to evolution, the Biologos Foundation.[4]

Keller lays out his strategy in his 2008 bestseller *The Reason for God*,[5] and refines it in his 2009 paper for Biologos entitled 'Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople'. This strategy is summarized in the following lines:

> ... there are a variety of ways in which God could have brought about the creation of life forms and human life using evolutionary processes, and that the picture of incompatibility between orthodox faith and evolutionary biology is greatly overdrawn.[6]

In other words, there is no real opposition between Christian faith and evolution. You can believe them both, since evolution is simply the means by which God created. Problem solved.

It would certainly be nice to think that Keller has found a way to solve one of the most troublesome apologetic issues of our time without getting his hands dirty. But does he succeed? That is uncertain, for a few reasons.

First of all, Keller's framing of the problem is misplaced. He seems to think that the great problem in urgent need of solution is the difficulty people experience when they have to go against the proclamations of prestigious authorities, in this case, secular scientists. Yet such conflicts are neither unexpected nor intolerable; this is simply the normal situation of the church militant throughout the ages. By defining the problem in this way, Keller moves us away from the proper domain of faithful

apologetics—clarifying the Christian position in contradistinction to the world's errors—into something else entirely. In Keller's framing of the problem, the only possible solution is some form of accommodation.

Second, Keller rightly notices that there is a big difference between the objective findings of biology and a 'grand theory of everything' which is an unwarranted extrapolation from them. Yet he does not apply this extremely important insight far enough. The very same line of reasoning would also show us why we need not capitulate when confronted with the Darwinian theory of origins, given just how far it strays from a solid basis in direct observation and repeatable experimentation.

Third, Keller suggests that there is a *via media* wherein we can affirm both the reality of evolution and also the biblical teaching of God's creation. But what sort of evolution does Keller think is consistent with Christian faith?[7] An evolution that produced Adam? We certainly hope not, because that would flatly contradict Scripture and would undermine the whole of Pauline religion. Or does he mean an evolution that had nothing to do with Adam? But explaining human origins is the capstone claim of evolutionary science, and any teaching that omits this crucial piece would not begin to solve the problem of tension with secular science that Keller is so concerned with.

For these reasons, we would have to question whether Keller's ambitious proposal succeeds in what it sets out to do. Let us begin with Keller's definition of the problem.

1. The Definition of the Problem

In his 2009 conference paper for the Biologos foundation, Keller begins by defining the problem:

> Many secular and many evangelical voices agree on one 'truism'—that if you are an orthodox Christian with a high view of the authority of the Bible, you cannot believe in evolution in any form at all. [...] If you believe in God, you can't believe in evolution. If you believe in evolution, you can't believe in God. This creates a problem for both doubters and believers. Many believers in western culture ... have a very positive view of science. How then, can they reconcile what science seems to tell them about evolution with their traditional theological beliefs? Seekers and inquirers about Christianity can be even more perplexed. They may be drawn to many things about the Christian faith, but, they say, 'I don't see how I can believe the Bible if that means I have to reject science.'[8]

Keller notices the mental anguish involved when people think they have to make a choice between the teaching of God in Scripture and the teaching of science in evolution. In other words, the problem he wants to solve is the difficulty that ordinary people—both doubters and believers alike—experience because they think they have to make a choice between these two important sources of authority.

Keller is not the only one who defines the problem in terms of this tension. Indeed, he is far more restrained than fellow Biologos contributor Bruce Waltke:

> I think that if the data is overwhelming in favor of evolution, to deny that reality will make us a cult ... some odd group that is not really interacting with the real world ... To deny the reality would be to deny the truth of God in the world and would be to deny truth. So I think it would be our spiritual death ... it's

> also our spiritual death in our witness in the world, we're not credible, that we are bigoted, that we have a blind faith.'[9]

Waltke thinks that allowing the tension between evolutionary science and Christianity to continue would be absolutely suicidal—it would 'make us a cult' and would 'be our spiritual death'. Keller does not paint the picture quite as black as this, but the essential definition of the problem is the same: the problem is that we are forcing people to make an impossible choice between faith and science.

Whether Keller has good company in defining the problem this way or not, he is nonetheless setting us up for failure. The world is going to oppose God's truth (1 John 4:5–6). If we define the problem as the mere presence of this opposition then it really does not matter whether what is being taught is right or wrong; the goal is not to adjudicate competing truth claims but to eliminate the tension between them. The only possible solution to a problem posed in this way is accommodation.

Of course, this is not the only way to respond to such issues. Christians have in times past recognized that the world inevitably makes claims that are incompatible with the faith, but concluded that they must courageously hold to the truth of Scripture nonetheless. If there is a cost, it must be endured. In the early church, those in positions of worldly authority were making very dogmatic claims that Caesar was Lord. I suppose that the church could have defined the problem along these lines:

> Many pagan and many Christian voices agree on one 'truism'—that if you are an orthodox Christian with a high view of the authority of the Bible, you cannot believe in Roman civil religion in any form at all. If you believe that Christ is Lord, you can't

> believe that Caesar is Lord. If you believe that Caesar is Lord, you can't believe that Christ is Lord. This creates a problem for both doubters and believers. Many believers in the Greco-Roman world have a very positive view of the Roman Empire. How then, can they reconcile what the Empire seems to tell them with their traditional theological beliefs? Seekers and inquirers about Christianity can be even more perplexed. They may be drawn to many things about the Christian faith, but, they say, 'I don't see how I can believe the Bible if that means I have to reject Roman civil religion.'

They could have done this, but they did not. For them, portraying the conflict between Rome and the Christian faith as a problem to be solved merely by an adjustment in their thinking would be amusingly naive. The opposition between these competing claims was not a false dichotomy to be smoothed over but a deadly reality to be sealed with the blood of faithful martyrs.

Now, are the dogmatic claims of evolutionary science really so unparalleled that they demand a completely different approach? The 'many evangelical voices' that Keller describes as thinking evolution and orthodox Christianity to be mutually exclusive propositions are obviously not convinced. Keller might respond that evolutionary science is a unique case because, unlike Rome, evolutionary science actually tells us the truth about the world around us. But what authoritative ideology—philosophical, political, or scientific—does not purport to tell us the truth about the world around us? The fact that they make such claims on the basis of something the culture reveres (in this case, science), and that many people therefore believe them, is just the nature of the beast. There is no particular

reason why the conflict of Christianity with evolutionary science is a problem demanding a solution any more than the conflict of Christianity with Islam (an ideology which, much like evolutionary theory, was conceived in self-conscious rejection of Christianity).

2. What 'Science' is Keller Talking About?

A second problem has to do with the way Keller uses the word 'science'. Keller observes: 'Many of the strongest proponents for evolution as a biological process (such as Dawkins) also see it as a "Grand Theory of Everything."'[10] Thus, in his second section, he asks:

> Question #2: If biological evolution is true—does that mean that we are just animals driven by our genes, and everything about us can be explained by natural selection?
>
> Answer: No. Belief in evolution as a biological process is not the same as belief in evolution as a world-view.[11]

So evolution as a biological process need not demand belief in evolution as a world-view or theory for everything. One could question the details here—our beliefs about creation usually have something to do with our world-view—but Keller has yet put his finger on something terribly important. He has brought to our attention the fact that men move all too easily from valid observation of nature to unwarranted extrapolation in theories.

Strangely, however, he does not seem to notice that this crucial insight might apply to evolutionary biology itself. To go back to the origins of evolutionary science, Darwin made

use of valid observations such as the fact that some Galapagos finches had larger beaks than others. He eventually interpreted this as an example of new species evolving through the mechanisms of random mutation and natural selection. But prolonged observation of the Galapagos islands since then tells a more complex story. It turns out that beak morphology, while influenced by environmental conditions, remains on a limited continuum. A severe drought in 1977 temporarily induced more of the finch population to express larger beaks, but this adaptation was soon reversed when the weather was unusually wet a few years later.[12] In other words, the finches are not evolving into larger-beaked birds, nor are they evolving into smaller-beaked birds, but are simply displaying the limited range of environmental adaptation possible within a stable kind (sometimes called 'micro-evolution').

It is not merely the Galapagos finch evidence alone that is thereby called into question, however. *All* evidence of environmental adaptation which has not actually resulted in a new life form is suspect because it might likewise prove only to be a reversible phenomenon belonging to a stable kind.[13] Not understanding this, however, Darwin extrapolated from precisely this kind of evidence his theory that every living thing on earth has evolved from primitive life forms. This was, to put it mildly, an unwarranted extrapolation. The point is that it is not merely a 'Grand Theory of Everything' that we should regard with suspicion, it is any 'scientific' conclusion that overreaches the valid limits of the data.

Because of this, we need to define very carefully what we mean by 'science'. Science could mean:

(1) the objective data of nature ('Science A'), or

(2) the consensus pronouncements of recognized scientific authorities ('Science B')

Although these may in many cases amount to the same thing, it is clear that this is not always the case. The history of science is littered with confident but erroneous pronouncements, as Thomas Kuhn explains so well in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*.[14]

Yet Keller seems to accept the (erroneous) assumption that these two senses of the word 'science' are one and the same. Notice the confusion of these senses of the word in the following paragraph:

> Many believers in western culture see the medical and technological advances achieved through science and are grateful for them. They have a very positive view of science. How then, can they reconcile what science seems to tell them about evolution with their traditional theological beliefs?[15]

'Medical and technological advances achieved through science' are necessarily grounded in physical reality rather than merely in fallible pronouncements, so this is Science A. On the other hand, 'what science seems to tell them about evolution' is Science B.

Keeping this distinction in mind, Keller could have said that our gratitude for technological achievement does not entail a servile deference to whatever the scientific authorities tell us, especially when a theory extends beyond any contemporary ability to test conclusively. For example, the electric light bulb was invented in the 1870s.[16] This was a wonderful technological advance grounded squarely on the realities of nature (Science A) for which we can all be grateful.

However, at the very same time in history the official scientific consensus (Science B) was teaching a theory of light that required a notional medium called the 'luminiferous ether', later disproved with the advent of better experimental techniques and more accurate theories.[17]

From there, Keller could have dealt with the problem by reasoning along these lines: 'It is true that the great majority of scientists say that all life evolved from non-life. However, like the "luminiferous ether" of Victorian science, this is a theory that lies beyond the ability of contemporary science to determine conclusively. Despite many efforts, no one has yet been able to demonstrate the creation of life from non-life in laboratory experiments. Moreover, because the origin of life on earth is a singular event that lies in the distant past rather than an ongoing phenomenon like light, it is unlikely that science could ever be in a position to make an authoritative determination on this issue one way or another. This being the case, we need not be overly concerned if scientists currently teach an account of origins that conflicts with Scripture. We can still be thankful for our laptops and vaccines; none of these things depends in the slightest upon Darwinian theory for their existence or efficacy.' This would have been a very reasonable way to help fellow ministers talk to their people on this important pastoral issue. Sadly, Keller takes another route. Rather than calling into question the pronouncements of fallible scientists, he calls into question a literal reading of Scripture.[18]

3. What Sort of 'Evolution' Does Keller Propose?

Finally, we must try to understand what Keller is either proposing or at least defending as legitimate when he talks about 'evolution'. Let us return to Keller's introductory statement:

> However, there are many who question the premise that science and faith are irreconcilable. Many believe that a high view of the Bible does not demand belief in just one account of origins. They argue that we do not have to choose between an anti-science religion or an anti-religious science. They think that there are a variety of ways in which God could have brought about the creation of life forms and human life using evolutionary processes, and that the picture of incompatibility between orthodox faith and evolutionary biology is greatly overdrawn.[19]

Keller does not define exactly what he means by God bringing about 'the creation of life forms and human life using evolutionary processes', but let us consider the possibilities for the most important issue: Adam. There are really only two options: either Keller includes Adam in his proposal that it is acceptable to believe God used 'evolutionary processes' to create, or else he does not include Adam.

The first possibility—that God created Adam using evolution—is the straightforward implication of the quote itself. Keller mentions '... the creation of life forms and *human life* using evolutionary processes', and that would surely seem to include Adam.[20] Furthermore, the paper goes on to point to a theory that explains religious belief in terms of evolution: 'It may be that capacity for religious belief is "adaptive" or is connected to other adaptive traits, passed down from our ancestors because they supported survival and reproduction.' Keller quotes a proponent of this view who says that 'supernaturalistic belief would be in due course a human universal', and concurs that his 'argument is sound'.[21] All of this demands a Darwinian understanding of survival advantages leading to the development of a more advanced form of life. Since it is clear that Adam

himself believed in the supernatural, this implies that he was one of many hominids but ended up with a competitive advantage over the others in terms of spirituality.

So we are compelled to consider the possibility that Keller thinks it is permissible for us to believe that Adam was created through evolution. Yet we must be very clear that this would certainly not be an acceptable position.[22] Genesis 2:7 is most unambiguous: 'And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being' (Gen 2:7). Notice the specific elements that are expressed here. Adam was formed from the 'dust of the ground' rather than from any living predecessor. God then 'breathed into his nostrils the breath of life', life which this collection of dust particles did not previously possess. And just for good measure, Scripture concludes 'and man became a living being', a biological status which he previously did not have. It is not that the image of God or a soul was bestowed on an already-living hominid, but non-living dust became a living being. This utterly excludes the possibility of any living predecessors of whatever description.

Moreover, such a proposal is theologically unacceptable. The entirety of Pauline religion is founded upon the existence of a real man, Adam, who was created perfectly good straight from the hand of God and in whose hands the fate of the entire human race rested:

> Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned [...] Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of him who was to

> come. But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many (Rom 5:12–15).

The culpability of the human race, the justice of God, the basis of redemption, the identity of Christ, and the gospel itself are all predicated upon a first man, Adam, who was the biological and spiritual father of every human being. Without this biblical Adam we do not have a biblical Christianity.

Keller knows all this. He knows that the line is drawn with Adam. Indeed, he makes the point in a recent interview that he is personally 'an old earth progressive creationist, who believes there is a literal Adam and Eve'.[23] However, belief in a 'literal' Adam—a single human being from whom we all descended—does not necessarily preclude believing that this literal Adam had some kind of sub-human ancestor. This would seem to be what the language in Keller's white paper is designed to allow for; the idea that evolution was involved in the generation of Adam. In the aforementioned interview he declares that there should be 'wiggle room' in terms of acceptability within evangelical circles for 'an old earth person who still believes in a literal Adam and Eve but there could have been evolution involved'.[24] However, we are again left to guess at the details of this proposal. Exactly how are we to imagine a 'literal Adam' who had yet evolved from something else? The first man who was merely the next in a long series, the father of us all himself having a father? Does that mean that Abel would have regarded Adam's pre-human progenitor as his grandfather? Or, as a mere animal, was his status something more akin to a beloved family pet? We do not wish to be unkind by asking such questions,

but we really must think through the hard implications of this proposal before we can recommend it as orthodox.

In consideration of Keller's intelligence, no less than his long-demonstrated orthodoxy, let us move on now to consider another possibility.[25] Perhaps he is only talking about evolution somehow being used in various other aspects of creation, but having no role in God's immediate creation of Adam. This seems closer to Keller's personal position, which he distinguishes from theistic evolution as 'a bit more intervention, more God in there'.[26] Not every Christian would be happy with this proposal, but at least it does not cross the final line in the sand. Would this be an acceptable solution? Well, we must keep in mind how Keller has framed the problem. It is not primarily one of adjudicating truth claims, but of resolving the tension between them. It is therefore necessary that the solution Keller comes up with is something to which the advocates of evolution would at least accord some measure of respect.

Yet such a reception is highly unlikely. If evolution is about anything, it is surely about human origins. As far back as the Scopes trial, everyone understood that the theory of evolution taught that we have apes for ancestors. An account that included evolution at some places but left out this capstone of the project would seem to do very little to help Christians live in intellectual peace with the secular elite who regard the evolution of mankind from animals as an inviolable dogma.

While I am not aware of responses to Keller's specific proposal, we can look at the way a typical hard-line evolutionist regards Biologos in general. In a recent article concerning 'the accommodationist organization BioLogos', University of Chicago Professor Jerry Coyne has the following to say:

> *BioLogos* had the goal of turning evangelical Christians towards accepting evolution. They proposed to do this by showing literalist Christians that the Bible and Darwin were completely compatible. It didn't work of course. Efforts stalled, and *BioLogos* began engaging in all sorts of crazy apologetics, many of them trying to show how Adam and Eve—a couple that genetics tells us could not have spawned all humanity—could still somehow be human ancestors, ergo that Jesus didn't have to die for a metaphor. In the end, *BioLogos* went for the coward's solution, refusing to take a firm stand on whether Adam and Eve really existed. This, of course, was profoundly contradictory to their pro-science approach.[27]

In the midst of his vitriol, Coyne says some things we nonetheless need to hear. He points out that Biologos' goal to show how 'the Bible and Darwin are completely compatible' failed because it was fundamentally impossible. He says that this insoluble problem led them to engage in 'all sorts of crazy apologetics, many of them trying to show how Adam and Eve ... could still somehow be human ancestors'. He then notes the inherent inconsistency involved, 'This, of course, was profoundly contradictory to their pro-science approach.' It is clear that he neither regards such proposals as intellectually credible nor seems to respect the gesture involved. If this is what we get for our trouble, is accommodation really worth it?

Conclusion

Not every obstacle to faith is a false dichotomy waiting to be bridged. Some 'problems' are quite real and admit of no legitimate resolution. The intellectual conflict over the origins of life on

earth is a prime example. Hebrews 11:3 reminds us that 'By faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible.' Supernatural, special creation is thus an element of *faith*. And although evidences of God's existence and power are clearly seen throughout creation (Rom 1:19–20), natural man is never going to receive the truth of it. On the other hand, evolution was conceived by those outside the biblical faith, is currently taught by those outside the biblical faith, and is widely embraced by those outside this faith. If it were hypothetically possible to build a mediating bridge between these radically different perspectives, I am not sure we would want to. In any case, it is highly unlikely that it is indeed possible to build such a bridge. At least, as I think we have seen, no one has yet been able to do so.

Endnotes

1. In an interview for the New Canaan Society, Eric Metaxas asked Keller about his views on creation by asking the question, 'So, [is it] theistic evolution?' Keller responded 'Not quite.' ('2012 New Canaan Society Fireside Chat', http://www.ericmetaxas.com/tag/new-canaan-society/, accessed 3 July 2012).
2. Keller devotes one of his seven chapters dealing with objections in *Reason for God* to 'Science Has Disproved Christianity' (*Reason for God*, pp. 87–95).
3. See *Reason for God*, p. 87.
4. Keller has spoken at several of the main Biologos events, Keller's white paper on the subject is hosted by the Biologos site, and Keller's Redeemer Presbyterian Church is listed as a financial supporter of Biologos (http://biologos.org).
5. See *Reason for* God, pp. 84–96.
6. Keller, 'Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople' (2009: The Biologos Foundation), p. 1. http://biologos.org/uploads/projects/Keller_white_paper.pdf (accessed 3 July 2012).
7. Keller does not make the details of what he has in mind entirely clear in the 2009 paper. He has recently clarified that '... my position is, I am an old earth progressive creationist, who believes there is a literal Adam and Eve', although even this does not answer every question ('2012 New Canaan Society Fireside Chat'). In this chapter, rather than focusing on what Keller personally believes, we shall deal with the more important issue of *what he defends as being an acceptable position* for Christians to hold.

8. 'Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople', p. 1.
9. Bruce Waltke, video entitled 'Why Must the Church Accept Evolution?' posted on Biologos, 24 March 2012.: http://biologos.org/blog/why-must-the-church-come-to-accept-evolution. The video has now been removed, but the substance of the quotation is still on the web site (accessed 15 May 2013).
10. 'Creation, Evolution and Christian Laypeople,' p. 2.
11. 'Creation, Evolution and Christian Laypeople,' p. 5.
12. See http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/evolution/library/01/6/l_016_01.html; http://www.truthinscience.org.uk/tis2/index.php/component/content/article/53.html (both accessed 15 May 2013).
13. One might reply that this is a very high standard of evidence; after all, it takes thousands of years for one species to evolve into another. How are we supposed to demonstrate conclusively that this is actually happening before our eyes, and that our (peppered moth, Galapagos finch, domestic dog, hypothetical something) evidence is not merely another example of reversible adaptation within a stable kind that proves to be an evolutionary dead end? Precisely. This is yet another reason why the theory of evolution lies beyond the possibility of definitive demonstration, and why Christians should feel no particular demand to compromise over the issue.
14. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* 4th ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962).
15. 'Creation, Evolution and Christian Laypeople', p. 1.
16. This invention is often credited to Joseph Swann of Gateshead, England (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Swan, accessed 15 May 2013). Thomas Edison's contribution was more to perfect a commercially viable version of what had already been invented (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Edison, accessed 15 May 2013).
17. See the discussion in Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, pp. 73–76.
18. See 'Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople', pp. 3–5. Keller's reasoning is essentially that the author of Genesis did not intend for us to take Genesis literally, so we need not. Keller's protestations notwithstanding, this is an instance of special pleading that does nothing to preserve the plenary authority of Scripture.
19. 'Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople', p. 1.
20. 'Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople', p. 1.
21. 'Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople', p. 1.
22. In any full-scale evaluation of a doctrine of creation, we should consider whether all of the elements of the biblical doctrine of creation are upheld. From the Westminster standards, there are something like seven elements: (1) the Worker: creation was the sole work of the Triune God (WCF 4.1; WLC 15); (2) the Purpose: creation was done for the manifestation of the glory of God's eternal power, wisdom, and goodness (WCF 4:1); (3) the Time: creation was accomplished 'in the beginning' (WCF 4.1; WLC 15); (4) the Duration: the universe was created within the space of six days (WCF 4:1, WLC 15); (5) the Means: creation was effected by God's powerful word (WLC 15); (6) the Material: the universe was created of nothing, man from the dust of the earth, and woman from man (WCF 4:1, WLC 15, 17); and (7) the Quality: God declared that his creation was all very good (WCF 4:1, WLC 15). Theistic evolution constitutes a denial of most, if not all, of these elements.

23. '2012 New Canaan Society Fireside Chat'.
24. '2012 New Canaan Society Fireside Chat'.
25. Note also Keller's relevant comments in *Center Church*: 'The world is not an accident, but the creation of the one God (Genesis 1)' and 'You see, if we are merely the product of evolution—the strong eating the weak—on what basis can we object to strong nations oppressing weak ones, or powerful people oppressing marginalized ones? This is completely *natural* to the world if this material world is all there is. And if people are not made in the image of God but are simply the accidental product of blind forces, why would human beings be more valuable than, say, rocks and trees?' (*Center Church*, pp. 33, 129). However, these statements are not quite as unambiguous as we might hope for—the qualifications 'merely', 'accidental' and 'blind' mean that a theistic evolutionist could probably say them in good faith.
26. '2012 New Canaan Society Fireside Chat'.
27. From the website 'Why Evolution is True', http://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2013/01/31/a-new-president-for-biologos-but-no-progress-on-the-adam-and-eve-question/ (accessed 15 May 2013).

Looking for Communion in All the Wrong Places: Tim Keller and Presbyterian Ecclesiology

D. G. Hart

Introduction

Tim Keller is the most famous Presbyterian pastor in the United States today; but whether he identifies his ministry self-consciously with Presbyterianism is another question. Whenever editors or journalists identify Keller, his position at Redeemer Presbyterian Church (hereafter RPC) in New York City makes impossible any effort to locate him with a generic or non-denominational type of Protestantism. But aside from the name of the church that Keller planted over two decades ago and the loose affiliation that most Presbyterian congregations have with their overseeing denominations, the New York City pastor is not well known for practicing or defending a Presbyterian form of ministry under the oversight of elders in graded courts

and restricting ecumenical ties to communions of like faith and practice (i.e., Presbyterian and Reformed). A story in the *New York Times* from 1998, for instance, identified Keller as a conservative Christian but spent little time with what a Presbyterian version of conservative Christian might mean. The reporter indicated that Keller had 'managed to make a pull-no-punches Christianity credible to his congregation by packaging conservative theology in a nonjudgmental style'. In addition, Keller did not 'dictate personal behavior or politics in his sermons', but stressed 'people choosing the right path because of their spiritual connection to God'. Ten years later, a story in *New York* magazine described Redeemer as an evangelical megachurch that avoided all the Bible-belt stereotypes: 'yuppie Manhattanites—doctors, bankers, lawyers, artists, actors, and designers, some of them older, most of them in their twenties or thirties', singing praise to 'peppy Christian-pop anthems, performed by Broadway-caliber singers and working jazz professionals'.

Of course, Tim Keller would hardly be the first Presbyterian pastor not to follow the conventions or strictures of Presbyterian polity. But his popularity and especially his influence within the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) make his Presbyterian identity worth closer scrutiny. On the one hand, Keller has strong connections to leading figures in the world of young Calvinism through the Gospel Coalition. His presence among this mix of leaders, such as John Piper and D. A. Carson, greatly encourages evangelicals to think of themselves as Reformed even when they do not belong to Reformed churches. On the other hand, Keller's highly visible parachurch activities and interdenominational cooperation has diminished the influence of Old School Presbyterianism, at least among younger ministers

and church planters, within his own denomination, the PCA. In both cases Keller's impoverished ecclesiology, combined with the success of his congregation in New York City, has encouraged many Protestants in the United States to conceive of Reformed Protestantism as something distinct from ecclesiology; an irony, to be sure, considering that the church government term, *Presbyterian*, always finds its way into Keller's biography thanks to the name of his congregation.

What follows is an examination of the development of the New York City pastor's reflection on the ministry and the degree to which Reformed ecclesiology has informed both his thinking and his practice. The question that directly follows from this analysis is whether the ties that bind Keller to his Presbyterian communion by virtue of his ordination vows and the PCA's constitution function as any kind of guide or resource for him and his congregation. In other words, what bearing do these ties have on the New York City pastor's ministry? Equally important is a related question: if Keller's belonging to and ordination by the PCA do not define his ministry, why not? What prevents him from recognizing the limits that historically other Presbyterians have submitted to as the result of their ecclesiology? These questions are not Keller's alone, but face many contemporary pastors and congregations: namely, whether membership in the institutional church actually matters. Keller's own answer to that question appears to be negative.

Social justice and urban renewal

If any single factor accounted for Keller's ecclesiology (or lack thereof), it comes from a statement on RPC's website that arguably reveals the pastor's priorities. The fifth item on the congregation's statement of vision and values is the following:

> We have no illusions that our single church or our Presbyterian tradition is sufficient to renew all of New York City spiritually, socially, and culturally. We are therefore committed to planting (and helping others plant) hundreds of new churches, while at the same time working for a renewal of gospel vitality in all the congregations of the city.[1]

This is a striking assertion on several levels; which is why it is key to evaluating Keller's Presbyterianism. It is the only place in this document where the word *Presbyterian* appears and the assertion obviously indicates that Presbyterianism cannot do everything that needs to be done in RPC's efforts to renew New York City. Nor does this assertion even come with a qualification, such as that Presbyterian theology is adequate to explain the gospel and inform the teaching and preaching of RPC, but that Presbyterian ecclesiology is a barrier to some of the things a modern, urban congregation is called to do. Instead, the entire Presbyterian tradition—both theology and polity—will not prevent RPC, the way it did historically so many Reformed and Presbyterian communions, from cooperating with and even supporting non-Reformed congregations and associations.

Rather than letting Presbyterian procedure and practice set the agenda for RPC, the city and the need for community and spiritual renewal takes precedence. This is literally the case in the congregation's vision and values about the city and building community. RPC understands the city as follows:

> We believe that nothing promotes the peace and health of the city like the spread of faith in the gospel. It renews both individual lives and reweaves the fabric of whole neighborhoods. We believe

that nothing moves Christians to humbly serve, live with, and love all the diverse people of the city like the gospel does.

On community, Redeemer asserts:

> The gospel creates a new community which not only nurtures individuals but serves as a sign of God's coming kingdom. Here we see classes of people loving one another who could not have gotten along without the healing power of the gospel. Here we see sex, money, and power used in unique non-destructive and life-giving ways.[2]

The last two points in RPC's vision and values treat "serving" and "renewing":

> Though we joyfully invite every person to faith in Jesus, we are committed to sacrificially serving our neighbors whether they believe as we do or not. We do this by using our gifts and resources for the needs of others, especially the poor. And more than merely meeting individual needs, we work for justice for the powerless.[3]

> We believe that the gospel has a deep, vital, and healthy impact on the arts, business, government, media, and academy of any society. Therefore we are highly committed to support Christians' engagement with culture, helping them work with excellence, distinctiveness, and accountability in their professions.[4]

The issue here is not the lack of attention to Presbyterianism in Keller's congregation and its mission (though that is pertinent). It is simply to observe RPC and its senior pastor's priorities.

The list of core values does begin with assertions about the gospel and changed lives through faith in Christ. Still, instead of explaining what distinguishes the church as a Presbyterian congregation, RPC's values reveal the church to be an urban institution with a burden to build community among city-dwellers.

Keller himself came relatively late to New York City; but even before his arrival he had established ideas about cities and word and deed ministries (also known as mercy ministries) thanks to the influence of his Westminster Seminary professor, Harvie Conn. An Orthodox Presbyterian Church minister who started as a church planter in New Jersey before becoming a foreign missionary in Korea (under OPC auspices), Conn returned to the United States to occupy different teaching positions at Westminster Theological Seminary, first as a lecturer in apologetics and then as a professor of missions. With Roger Greenway, a Christian Reformed Church missionary and pastor, who also taught briefly at Westminster, Conn developed a theory and practice of urban missions and ministry that would have a profound influence on Keller. Indeed, the major themes of Keller's ministry and writing are on display in a chapter that Conn wrote for a book he co-edited with Greenway, *Discipling the City* (1979). There Conn begins to develop a theology of the city that sees urban centers as crucial to God's sovereign plan of redemption. He also describes the duties of urban Christians and congregations along the lines of the now common phrase, 'word and deed ministry'. On the one hand, Christians have a covenant task of 'heralding God's shalom', that is, calling the nations 'to repentance and faith'.[5] On the other hand, the evangelistic aim 'is never isolated from the needs of the city'. Israel's responsibility involved bringing justice to the city—

ending oppression, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked. The new Israel, according to Conn, has the same task and the stakes for failing to execute it are high: 'Urban injustice ... becomes apostasy, the rejection of the poor, the rejection of God.'[6] 'The whole city,' Conn added by way of a quotation from Greenway, 'from top to bottom, must be called to repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ.'[7]

In Keller's first book, *Ministries of Mercy* (1989), based on his D.Min. thesis[8] under Conn, the building blocks of his later church-planting effort in New York City are evident, as are tendencies that have implications for Presbyterian polity. For instance, a passing reference to 'every member ministry', just becoming established as an improvement on older understandings of the church, shows Keller's willingness to employ the word 'ministry' broadly. With it come implications that blur the historic distinctions between special office (ordination) and general church membership. Keller acknowledges the trend to open ministry to the non-ordained and then faults this construction for not including mercy. As such, modern churches were willing to involve the laity in all sorts of ministries of witness, but failed to use them in the ministry of mercy. Hence, churches continued to rely on experts, that is, 'secular agencies and authorities', to carry out the work of meeting the poor's physical needs. For Keller, Scripture is clear that '*all* Christians must have their own ministry of mercy'.[9] He concedes that congregations have officers ordained for the task of mercy—the diaconate. But again, the biblical call is for everyone to have a ministry.[10]

This book also allowed Keller to explore the idea of word and deed ministry. *Word* was shorthand for proclamation of Scripture and evangelism, while *deed* pointed to acts of mercy.

Keller argued that both word and deed were 'equally commanded and necessary' for a genuine church. He also asserted that word and deed functioned as independent means in establishing the kingdom of God. Keller conceded that word ministry was 'more radical' than deed ministry, and so more basic because it goes to the 'root or fount from which all brokenness flows'. Not every congregation could perform both word and deed at the same time and some conditions—a tornado that strikes a community or apartheid—obviously revealed that evangelism would have to wait for mercy ministries. Churches needed to plan and engage in constant self-evaluation to insure that word and deed functioned together. Even so, 'if we fail to provide for both the ministry of mercy and the ministry of the word,' he warned, 'we may still have an active and successful-appearing church.' But the 'actual growth of the kingdom' would not be occurring. Keller even feared that some of the 'most famous' congregations were no more than 'vain offerings' without sufficient attention to deed.[11]

As the argument about the interdependence of word and deed suggests, Keller was employing an understanding of the relationship between the church and the kingdom of God that undergirded his version of mercy ministry but also veered from historic Reformed teaching. He invoked the already/not-yet distinction to assert that the kingdom of God is present but will not be completely revealed or fulfilled until Christ's second coming. People entered this kingdom through faith and repentance. The kingdom granted power to believers to meet 'psychological, social, physical needs, bringing God's kingly blessing far as the curse is found'.[12] The church was a 'pilot plant' of the kingdom, a 'new society in which the world can see what family dynamics, business practices, race relations,

and all of life can be under the kingship of Christ'. At the same time, this kingdom came through more than 'simply winning people to Christ'. It is also 'working for the healing of persons, families, relationships, and nations ... doing deeds of mercy and seeking justice'.[13] Had Keller examined carefully the teaching of the Westminster Confession on the visible church as the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ that comes through the ordinances of word, sacraments, prayer, and worship, he might have qualified his expansive understanding of both church ministry and kingdom territory.

At the time, Keller was teaching practical theology at Westminster Seminary (Philadelphia) and the director of mercy ministries for the PCA, so his lack of references to Reformed teaching on the nature of the church or Presbyterian polity likely surprised Reformed readers. In fact, the only direct reference to Presbyterianism in the book was one to the work and ideals of Thomas Chalmers, the prominent Scottish Presbyterian who revived parish models of relief for the poor that had been part of the Church of Scotland's historic practices. Keller approvingly cited the Kirk's provision for the poor in each parish through congregational funds overseen by deacons. To the charge that Chalmer's revival of diaconal relief though the parish system competed with state welfare programs, Keller responded that this was precisely the point. Chalmers understood, and Keller agrees, that 'the church could do what the government could not'. By combining word and deed, Chalmers was addressing 'the moral and spiritual roots of poverty', not simply providing welfare.[14] In a footnote about the differences between Scottish and American Presbyterianism, Keller wondered why Presbyterians in the New World did not replicate the system that Chalmers attempted to restore. One important difference

was the relationship between church and state and the disestablishment of Christianity in the United States. But Keller expressed admiration for the way that the Church of Scotland had support from the state and recognition from the culture (even though he completely overlooked the Disruption of 1843 which left Chalmers outside the patronage of Scotland's civil authorities and divided Scottish religious culture). He also found American support for his understanding of mercy ministry from an 1892 General Assembly report (PCUSA) that called upon new world churches to restore the diaconate 'to its proper dignity as the most ancient and one of the most significant ecclesiastical functions'.[15]

To this point in Keller's theoretical development the city had not emerged as a prominent theme, even though for his mentor, Conn, it was already a fundamental piece of his understanding of missions and contextualization. Only when Keller took the call to be the church planter for Redeemer Presbyterian Church in 1989 did some of Conn's writing on the redemptive-historical significance of the city begin to pay dividends for Keller's efforts in Manhattan. In an article for the British magazine *Evangelicals Now*—more an outline than an essay—Keller provided the bullet points of an outline for a biblical theology of cities. First, cities are God's invention, since Scripture culminates in the city as the 'apex' of redemption. Second, cities develop civilization by functioning as places of refuge, attracting outsiders and immigrants, and providing space for the worship of God. Third, Keller acknowledges that sin afflicts cities; they become sites for sexual license, class strife and bitterness, and places of ambition and pride. Still, despite the questionable reputation that cities have among middle-class evangelicals, he argues that cities are crucial to

evangelizing and transforming a culture. As such, the city has functioned as a pivotal place in the history of redemption—where Ezra recovered the word, where Nehemiah provided a safe and functional haven, where Esther worked for justice, and where Jeremiah instructed exiles to seek 'the peace of the city'. Indeed, Keller's urban biblical theology reads less like a statement about the city's redemptive-historical significance than a call by a missionary/apologist for evangelism. For instance, he writes that in a village, 'you might win the one or two lawyers to Christ, but if you wanted to win the legal profession, you need to go to the city where you have the law schools, the law journals published, etc.' To be sure, according to this logic evangelizing cities could be part of a postmillennial vision for winning the world to Christ and ushering in his millennial reign. At the same time, Keller's tone is basically pragmatic—to be effective evangelistically, evangelicals need to pay attention (and move) to cities.[16]

Keller also wrote a piece for *Christianity Today International* on 'A New Kind of Urban Christian', in which he develops another piece of theological urbanism. The argument draws more on strategy and less on biblical warrant. For instance, one of Keller's points is that Christians should live in cities because the people who do work in the arts, education, business, and law and so 'tend to have a disproportionate impact on how things are done in our culture'. This observation fits with the evangelistic aim that animates most of Keller's discussion of cities. But it does not necessarily follow from some of his other arguments. In addition to living in cities, Keller exhorts believers to be part of a dynamic counterculture, as a 'particular kind of community'. He even calls this community an 'alternative city within every earthly city'. This suggests a form of separatism,

even a ghetto, as the embodiment of such a Christian counterculture. But such segregation would hardly fit with Keller's point about people in cities having disproportionate influence, since the more someone lives purposefully in contrast to the dominant culture, the more he or she will lose the capacity for a wider influence. This may be why Keller always links the call to a counterculture with another one to 'radical' commitment to the city as a whole, thus following the instruction of Jeremiah 29 to seek the welfare of the city. Even here Keller seems to miss the point that the Israelites' exilic existence was not part of a strategy for evangelism but punishment for unfaithfulness. His misreading of exile is particularly evident when Keller writes about Jeremiah's instruction as part of God's call to bring shalom to the earthly city. Since shalom is an eschatological category that points to the final restoration of all things, not to a plan for earthly justice, Keller appears to be guilty of loading too much freight on to the back of Jeremiah's prophecy. One last aspect of Keller's urbanist theology involves using the language of vocation to call urban believers to integrate their faith with their work. This is another way of trying to reconcile the ideal of forming a counterculture with the desire to be part of cities' influence on the wider culture.[17]

Keller's twin commitments to word and deed and to urban ministry have led him into cooperative projects with non-Presbyterians, a further indication of the degree to which his Presbyterianism defines his ministry. The most prominent example of his willingness to form ministerial associations with non-Reformed Protestants is the Gospel Coalition. This organization is active largely through a website and a national conference. Individual congregations may join the Coalition but the reality of this affiliation depends on the council members,

many of whom pastor large and popular congregations, including John Piper, Mark Dever, Mark Driscoll and Tim Keller. The Coalition is committed to a 'deep and broad consensus' about the gospel that seeks to transcend 'monastic retreats into ritual, liturgy, and sacrament'.[18] This outlook pays no attention to denominational differences over church polity and sacraments. Theologically, the Gospel Coalition generally follows a Calvinistic understanding of salvation, though the statement of faith avoids the language of the Reformed confessions. The Coalition also has a 'Vision for Ministry' that follows Keller directly with statements on 'Counter-cultural Community', 'The Integration of Faith and Work', and 'The Doing of Justice and Mercy'. In fact, the language employed by the Coalition to describe these aspects of ministry is almost the same as that used by Redeemer Presbyterian Church and its satellite congregations. Furthermore, the Coalition's description of justice and mercy ministry is remarkably similar to Keller's argument in his book *Generous Justice*:

> God is concerned not only for the salvation of souls but also for the relief of poverty, hunger, and injustice. The gospel opens our eyes to the fact that all our wealth (even wealth for which we worked hard) is ultimately an unmerited gift from God. Therefore the person who does not generously give away his or her wealth to others is not merely lacking in compassion, but is unjust.[19]

If Keller's involvement as a Presbyterian pastor in an interdenominational endeavor to renew the Christian ministry did not raise enough questions about his understanding of the church, his own network of churches founded under the auspices

of RPC should challenge those inclined to give Keller the benefit of the doubt. Redeemer City to City is a church-planting network that started with RPC's initial efforts to plant churches throughout the New York metropolitan area. It now extends to churches around the world, particularly to congregations in large urban centers, and its aim is to sustain a movement of churches not with a Presbyterian model but with Redeemer's vision for ministry. That vision includes a recognition of the 'societal brokenness' that urban dwellers face, the church's call to serve 'all of these needs, including directly serving the poorest and most vulnerable populations in the city', providing training for leaders and churches that 'result in spiritual growth, the flourishing of neighborhoods, reconciliation between classes and races, and the renewal of family life, education, health, and vocation'.[20] It is also a trans-denominational church-planting network that follows from Keller's own willingness to cooperate with non-Reformed Christians: 'Reaching a city requires a willingness to work with other churches, even churches that hold to different beliefs and practices ... We have helped to start Pentecostal churches, Baptist churches, and Anglican churches, as well as Presbyterian churches.'[21] But it is a movement of churches with Redeemer at its hub, that follow the New York City congregation's own understanding of the gospel, the city, and methods for reaching large urban areas. How Redeemer City to City fits with Keller's involvement with the PCA's domestic and foreign missions agencies is something of a mystery. Redeemer City to City would appear to be either a pointless redundancy or else a self-conscious alternative that is in some degree of competition with his denomination's own church-planting arms.[22]

The preceding overview of Keller's reflections about effective

churches and participation in church networks reveals an ecclesiology that is highly pragmatic and fluid. The New York City pastor will practically engage in countless novel practices for the sake of the mercy and urban aspects of ministry that he believes to be true to biblical teaching. In fact, Keller's constant honing of a congregational model and form of ministry devoted to the needs and realities of large metropolitan centers reflects the mentality of a church-planter more than a settled pastor. This dynamic would account for Keller's repeated references to strategic purpose, such as arguing that evangelizing cities is crucial to winning or transforming a culture. At the same time, Presbyterian norms for ministry have no real place in Keller's thought or activities. He does not demand that the ministries in which he participates be under the oversight of presbyters, nor does he endeavor to cooperate only with churches and pastors who believe in and function within Presbyterian forms of ministry, outreach, and ecumenism. Keller does not even seem to be aware that his status as a minister in the PCA could potentially limit his involvement with non-Presbyterian ministries or even place constraints on his congregation in New York City. Of course, Keller does not bear responsibility alone for trying to square his involvements with the PCA's ecclesiastical structures. Pastors and presbyteries within the denomination might also bring to Keller's attention the irregularities of his activities and thinking. Because both sides appear to be silent about the conformity of Keller and Redeemer to Presbyterian norms, the challenge to Presbyterian ecclesiology that Keller represents may go beyond New York City to the entire denomination.

Keller on his own communion

Although Keller's failure to regulate his activities according to Presbyterian polity reveals an apparent ignorance of Reformed ecclesiology, the New York City pastor himself has spent some time reflecting on the history and character of his own denomination as well as the larger history of Presbyterianism in the United States. In two different papers given before pre-Assembly conferences for the PCA, Keller has attempted to map the various cultures of his own denomination and to explain the PCA's relationship to earlier Presbyterian developments. In each case, the New York City pastor ignores the ecclesiological dimension of Presbyterian history and instead locates the most important tension between doctrinalism and pietism.

In 2003, Keller presented a paper, 'The Cultures of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)', in which he divided the denomination into three different parties—the Reformed-historicals, the Reformed-conservatives, and the Reformed-evangelicals. The overarching theme for his analysis was Christ and culture. The Reformed-historicals stood for Christ-against-culture, the Reformed-conservatives for Christ-above-culture, and the Reformed-evangelicals for Christ-transforming-culture. The basis for this classification stemmed from theological convictions: Reformed-historicals were the party of the Puritan Sabbath and systematic theology, Reformed-conservatives the group upholding traditional culture and family values within America, and the Reformed-evangelicals advocating evangelism, mission, and church-planting. Throughout the entire presentation, Keller did not identify with any particular group, or at least he offered what comes across as a dispassionate description of parties within the PCA. At the same time, his understanding revealed tone deafness to ecclesiology, both in

his depiction of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Presbyterian conservatives and in his own advice to fellow PCA officers.[23]

In his study of American Presbyterian history, Keller acknowledged the presence of conservative voices such as the Old Side and Old School Presbyterians who emerged respectively in the First and Second Great Awakenings to oppose deviations within the American church thanks to irregularities introduced by revivalists. Keller placed both groups within the Reformed-historical wing of American Presbyterianism, owing to these Presbyterians' adherence to strict subscription and Reformed theology. Almost entirely lacking in his understanding of the Old Side and Old School is the degree to which the doctrine of the church motivated their opposition to revivalist innovation and experimentation. The Old Side tried for a time but finally refused to tolerate the flagrant disregard that Presbyterian revivalists showed to determinations by Synod, boundaries established by individual presbyteries, and the lawful authority of fellow ministers. The Protestation of 1741 which split the colonial church between the Old and New Side synods invoked a doctrine of the church that understood synods and presbyteries as an ordinance of God for the good of the church within the plan of redemption. So too, Old School Presbyterians in 1837 exscinded their New School counterparts not simply because of Arminian theology but also because they were committed to Presbyterian polity, opposed the parachurch agencies favored by revivalists, and sought to end the Plan of Union (1801) which had brought Presbyterians and Congregationalists into an awkward cooperative arrangement for planting churches in the western territories. In fact, the Old School Presbyterians were the one group to draw upon and refine a high doctrine of the church, sometimes known as *jure divino* Presbyterianism,

that claimed the Presbyterian form of government to be the one revealed in Scripture and required for a truly Reformed church. The closest Keller comes to acknowledging such ecclesiology comes in his description of the Old Side and their emphasis on 'doctrine, tradition, and church authority'. Otherwise, he is blind to the ecclesiological dimension of conservative Presbyterianism. He even entertains the old modernist tactic of dismissing the Old School on the grounds that they were products of their culture. '[I]t is just too simple,' he wrote, 'to hold up 19th century Presbyterianism as the answer for today as if these forms were pure and untainted by culture.'[24]

Although Keller does not readily identify with any of the PCA groups he maps, he was willing to offer advice based on his description. Here his disregard for ecclesiology and the constraints of Presbyterian polity are well-nigh remarkable. First, he tells fellow officers not to split from their current denominational affiliation. 'Stay and keep the structure from hindering your work.' He adds, engage in 'hard-nosed, smart politics to keep denominational connection from hindering your mission'. This advice is breathtaking, at least from an Old School or Old Side perspective, because Presbyterian procedure and governance are not barriers to ministry but the very means that God has ordained for the ministry of word, sacrament, and discipline to flourish. Rather than acknowledge this notion of Presbyterianism, Keller, true to his pragmatic and evangelistic instincts, regards Presbyterian polity and connectionalism as accessories to a more basic ministry. This is particularly evident when Keller comes to his second piece of advice for PCA officers: 'Don't be independent or denominational but build *intra* and *inter* denominational alliances for mission.'[25] On the

one hand, Keller says that denominational agencies are 'seldom seen to be all that helpful or cutting edge'. On the other hand, they do provide the bonus of credentialing pastors and exerting moral discipline. For that reason, he encourages congregations to maintain a denominational identity and to 'do mission' across denominational boundaries. Again, for Keller the determining factor is not what Scripture teaches about the oversight of churches and ministry by elders and the unity of the church through connectional ties and graded assemblies but what is most effective for evangelism and mission.

Keller's second diagnosis of the PCA and its conflicting camps came at a pre-Assembly seminar in 2010 with the paper, 'What's So Great about the PCA?' Part of what makes the PCA great is the diversity of outlooks and even the controversy such differences generate. To explain this virtue Keller once again dons his spiritual stethoscope and diagnoses the PCA's health. He starts with the Old-Side/New-Side controversy and boils it down to a conflict between doctrine and piety. According to Keller, the Old Side stressed the objectivities of the gospel through correct theology and subscription, while the New Side tapped the older Puritan interest in subjective experience. He does not seem to be aware that one of the objectivities the Old Side stressed was a high view of the church and its role in salvation. When he turns to the nineteenth-century split between Old and New School Presbyterians, he regards the controversy as one between doctrinalists and transformers of culture. Again, the conservatives—the Old School—were committed to correct theology while the innovators sought to involve Christians in various campaigns for social reform. Keller fails to consider that the doctrine of the church was one of the constellation of doctrines that informed the Old School's critique of New

School transformationalism. The last stop in his historical overview is the rise of neo-evangelicalism in the 1940s, which Keller regards as an expression of orthodox culturalism, or cultural transformationalism with correct theology. He compliments Carl Henry and Francis Schaeffer for combining right doctrine with social activism. This estimate repeats Keller's neglect of ecclesiology. He wants to combine the best of Presbyterianism's different parties but does not seem to consider that adhering to a Presbyterian form of church government may actually prevent ministers or churches from engaging in certain activities or alliances.

Keller uses the history of American Presbyterianism to explore the sources of antagonism in the PCA. He finds within his denomination a party that emphasizes religious experience, another that stresses correct doctrine, and still one more that wants the church to be an agent of cultural transformation. Underneath these historic disagreements—'the issue beneath the issues'—is a fear 'that the other side is going to get a leg up and move the PCA away from where [it has] been historically'.[26] This way of putting the subtext of PCA disputes suggests that each side is interested in ecclesiastical politics and suffers from a desire to run the denomination. Equally plausible is an explanation that traces the PCA's conflicts to divergent understandings of what the Bible teaches and requires, thus making compromise less likely because of an unwillingness to tolerate error or infidelity. But Keller is not inclined to understand the PCA's conflicts this way because he believes that each wing of the denomination has flaws that can only be remedied by remaining connected to the other groups. 'Each branch of Presbyterianism needs the others,' Keller writes, 'in order to escape its own inherent blind spots and weaknesses.' 'We need

each other. We can't live comfortably with each other, but we are much less robust and vital apart from each other.'[27]

Throughout Keller's analysis of the PCA and Presbyterian history, he remains aloof from taking a side or identifying with a particular wing. Readers may assume that he sympathizes more with the New Side than the Old Side because of his own high estimate of Jonathan Edwards. They may also conclude that Keller is more inclined to agree with the New School's efforts at cultural transformation than with the Old School's refusal to cooperate with non-Presbyterian churches or participate in parachurch agencies. Indeed, Keller's sympathies run invariably with those groups that the Old Side and Old School doctrinalists opposed. Still, he never identifies with any side or school. He is content to be a unique Presbyterian, one who perhaps combines the best elements. This conclusion is all the more plausible because of Keller's acknowledgment that each of the tendencies within American Presbyterianism has flaws and so needs the other perspective.

What this recognition lacks in his own case is an admission of where his own flaws lie. If Keller were as prone to excess as he believes other Presbyterians have been, then he might admit that his own emphases on word and deed ministry, or the way he plants churches, or the way he cooperates with non-Reformed ministries, or the way he conceives of cultural transformation need correction from the other parts of American Presbyterianism. But this does not happen. Keller's analysis of the wings of Presbyterianism seldom appears to change his own involvements or ministries. Whether he intends to communicate this or not, Keller gives the impression that he does not need the input or oversight of other officers in his own communion. It is as if he is going about the work of RPC and its satellite agencies

and will offer his own observations about the general well-being of the PCA. But Keller gives no indication that the oversight of the PCA is going to restrain or limit what he does either as a minister or through RPC. What may explain this indifference to corrections or rebukes coming from his denomination—aside from the pedestal upon which at least the home missions establishment within the PCA has placed Keller—is his indifference to the doctrine of the church and particularly the Presbyterian convictions regarding connectionalism and oversight by elders.

Community, movement, or communion?

One of Redeemer Presbyterian Church's core values is a commitment to community.

> The gospel creates a new community which not only nurtures individuals but serves as a sign of God's coming kingdom. Here we see classes of people loving one another who could not have gotten along without the healing power of the gospel. Here we see sex, money, and power used in unique non-destructive and life-giving ways.

What follows this conviction is Redeemer's statement about its desire to cooperate with a variety of churches, including non-Reformed ones, in planting churches. 'We have no illusions that our single church or our Presbyterian tradition is sufficient to renew all of New York City spiritually.' Consequently, Redeemer is 'committed to planting (and helping others plant) hundreds of new churches'.[28]

The juxtaposition of these core values, one to community and another to a movement, is curious, especially from the

perspective of Redeemer and Keller's status within the PCA. Whether or not the officers at Redeemer know it, they already belong to a community that is even closer and more profound than any of the ties that the congregation or its officers have established through either the Gospel Coalition or Redeemer City to City. For the theology that Redeemer confesses, at least formally through membership in the PCA, includes doctrines that have significant implications for the way that Christians understand community and the church.

The PCA's Confession of Faith teaches that believers 'are bound to maintain an holy fellowship and communion in the worship of God, and in performing such other spiritual services as tend to their mutual edification; as also in relieving each other in outward things, according to their several abilities and necessities' (WCF 26:2). This communion of saints could well apply indiscriminately to all Protestants, as Keller's practice appears to, since the Confession also teaches that this communion should be 'extended unto all those who, in every place, call upon the name of the Lord Jesus'. But the mention of worship and fellowship in this chapter of the confession, along with its proximity to a chapter on the church which speaks of both the importance of the visible church as 'the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ' (WCF 25:2) and the ordinances of God as the means for building up the saints, suggests at least that belonging to a Reformed communion is the closest instance of communion. It also suggests that the fraternity that Reformed churches have among themselves is another example of communion according to a common profession of faith, understanding of the sacramental theology, practice of worship, and standards for ordination.

In other words, Keller has a special communion and fellowship

with his fellow officers and church members in the PCA. But his congregation and cooperative endeavors seek to establish lines of fellowship and forms of community that transcend the particular ties he has by virtue of belonging to a Reformed communion. In fact, the communion that he has through belonging to the PCA does not seem to be as important or as valuable as the kind of community he hopes to establish through a network of urban churches committed to word and deed ministry and social justice. Keller could simply be guilty of ignorance, of not having thought through the implications of his own ordination and the bonds of fellowship that he and his Redeemer congregants have through the PCA. Whatever the reason, Keller's striving for community does not simply overlook the theology he professes but also the reality that he ministers within and belongs to his own Presbyterian communion. The bonds that believers in a particular denomination like the PCA have among themselves by virtue of shared standards for holy office, by recognizing and calling pastors, and through the holy supper that these ministers administer far surpasses the affinity or sense of camaraderie that comes to those who enter a parachurch association.

The disparity between Keller's practice and profession looks even larger in the light of the other doctrine that should control the New York City pastor's understanding of community, namely, that of church government. For ordination in most Presbyterian churches, officers need to acknowledge the truth of biblical teaching about Presbyterian church government. In the case of the PCA, ordination vows include the following:

> (3) Do you approve of the form of government and discipline of the Presbyterian Church in America, in conformity with the general principles of Biblical polity?

(4) Do you promise subjection to your brethren in the Lord?[29] Not only do these vows have constitutional standing within the PCA, but the subject of vows and oaths take up an entire chapter in the PCA's Confession of Faith (the Westminster Confession being one of the only Reformed creeds to devote such attention to this solemn part of church life and social practice). According to the PCA's Confession of Faith:

> Whosoever taketh an oath, ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act, and therein to avouch nothing but what he is fully persuaded is the truth. Neither may any man bind himself by oath to any thing but what is good and just, and what he believeth so to be, and what he is able and resolved to perform (WCF22:3).

If someone hoped to distinguish an ordination vow from an oath, they would not necessarily find a vow any less weighty, since the confession also teaches: 'A vow is of the like nature with a promissory oath, and ought to be made with the like religious care, and to be performed with the like faithfulness' (WCF 22:5).

Although Keller has subscribed the confession of faith, approved Presbyterian polity as the teaching of Scripture, and vowed to submit to his fellow officers in the PCA, his involvement with non-Presbyterians betrays his profession. Of course, Keller is not alone in the anomaly of the situation, nor is he the first Presbyterian pastor to fail to follow the checks supplied by ordination in a Reformed communion. His fellow officers in the PCA also bear responsibility for Keller's extra-ecclesiastical involvements. Even so, despite Keller's own study and knowledge of Presbyterian history in the United States, he does not appear

to let his professed loyalty to Presbyterian church government affect his willingness to work outside the boundaries of the PCA and Presbyterian polity.[30] And again, the community that he possesses by virtue of belonging to a Reformed communion, along with the constraints that follow from such fellowship (after all, Redeemer City to City has standards for joining its network of churches), does not appear to inform Keller's own understanding of his ministry or his involvement in a variety of parachurch endeavors.

Instead of letting Presbyterian convictions and his own membership within a Reformed communion shape the sort of congregation he helped to plant or the kind of ministries in which he is willing to participate, Keller has chosen to follow his own concept of the Christian ministry. That outlook evolved over the course of reflection about the nature of mercy ministries and the opportunity of planting a congregation in New York City with a commitment to urban ministry. What stands out in Keller and RPC's commitments is not adherence to Reformed theology, worship, and Presbyterian church government, but the priority of mercy ministries, urban sensibilities, and evangelistic strategy for transforming cities and the wider culture. Not even do Keller's own doctrinal convictions—what might be called experimental Calvinism—restrict his willingness to cooperate with other churches, ministries, and pastors, as long as those with whom he engages share a commitment to urban-based word and deed ministry that is oriented to 'impacting' the wider culture. Once upon a time Presbyterians who may not have had a high view of the visible church still refused to cooperate in parachurch associations with Protestants who were not Calvinistic in their soteriology. But for Keller, even this limitation does not appear to be a factor in his various

activities as a church-planting strategist. These contradictions make Keller the most popular contemporary Presbyterian pastor for whom the markers of Presbyterianism appear to matter very little. They also raise the question of whether Keller recognizes that his practice is at odds with Presbyterian church government; and if he does, how he justifies disregarding Presbyterian norms.

Endnotes

1. See 'Redeemer Core Values': http://www.redeemer.com/about_us/vision_and_values/core_values.html (accessed 15 May 2013).
2. 'Redeemer Core Values'.
3. 'Redeemer Core Values'.
4. 'Redeemer Core Values'.
5. Harvie M. Conn, 'Christ and the City: Biblical Themes for Building Urban Theological Models', in Roger S. Greenway and Harvie M. Conn (eds), *Discipling the City: Theological Reflections on Urban Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1979), p. 249.
6. Conn, 'Christ and the City', p. 252.
7. Conn, 'Christ and the City', p. 278.
8. Timothy J. Keller, 'Mobilizing for Mercy: the Diaconal Ministry of the Local Church' (D. Min. Thesis: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1981).
9. *Ministries of Mercy,* p.43. Quotations and page numbers in this chapter refer to the first edition of *Ministries of Mercy.*
10. *Ministries of Mercy*, p. 42.
11. *Ministries of Mercy*, p. 116.
12. *Ministries of Mercy*, p. 53.
13. *Ministries of Mercy*, p. 54.
14. *Ministries of Mercy*, pp. 88–89.
15. *Ministries of Mercy*, p. 92, note 18.
16. Keller, 'A Biblical Theology of the City', *Evangelicals Now*, July 2002: http://www.e-n.org.uk/p-1869-A-biblical-theology-of-the-city.htm (accessed 15 May 2013).
17. Keller, 'A New Kind of Urban Christian', posted on 15 June 2006, at http://www.christianvisionproject.com/2006/06/a_new_kind_of_urban_christian.html (accessed 15 May 2013).
18. The Gospel Coalition, 'The Gospel for All of Life: Preamble': http://thegospelcoalition.org/about/who (accessed 15 May 2013).
19. The Gospel Coalition, 'Theological Vision for Ministry': http://thegospelcoalition.org/about/who (accessed 15 May 2013).
20. Redeemer City to City, 'Approach': http://redeemercitytocity.com/our-story/approach.jsp (accessed 15 May 2013).

21. *Center Church*, pp. 368–369.
22. Redeemer City to City, 'Approach'.
23. Keller, 'The Cultures of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)': http://www.scribd.com/doc/50550923/TKeller-CultureofthePCA-rev-pdf (accessed 14 May 2013).
24. 'The Cultures of the Presbyterian Church in America', pp. 1, 2.
25. 'The Cultures of the Presbyterian Church in America', p. 5.
26. Keller, 'What's So Great about the PCA?': http://cdn.oldlife.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/WhyILikePCA-Tim-Keller.pdf, p. 14 (accessed 14 May 2013).
27. 'What's So Great about the PCA?', p. 18.
28. See 'Redeemer Core Values'.
29. Presbyterian Church in America, *Book of Church Order*, chapter 21.
30. Indeed, Keller writes, 'Unless you accept the fact that there is not one exclusively biblical church model, you will not see the need for strong fellowship and connections to other denominations and networks, which usually embody different emphases and strengths than the ones that characterize your model.' (*Center Church*, p. 370)

Postscript

The questions discussed in this book are the products of a well-intentioned but highly ambitious project carrying with it an unavoidable potential for tension. Tim Keller *intends* to teach the orthodox truth in a way that is relevant to contemporary culture. The problem is that some of his teachings seem to be better at being relevant than they are at conveying the fullness of biblical truth. Our goal has been to discuss these tensions openly, with the ultimate objective of helping the church to discern better ways of communicating our 'like precious faith' (2 Peter 1:1).

As part of this process, we hope to start a conversation. We recognize that there might be good answers to the questions we raise. We understand that this is only the beginning, and that this book will provoke some additional thinking and careful articulation in response, perhaps along with some amount of revision. This would fulfill our ambitions entirely. Indeed, we desire a *public* response. If Keller does not actually employ the teachings we have discussed, then we stand to be corrected. Or if he uses them, but there are good exegetical and theological

reasons which we have not considered as to why they faithfully convey the orthodox doctrine, that is all the better. We should then make these reasons known to the church so that she can make a better-informed decision regarding her message. In either case, we look forward to the process of clarification which we hope will follow. What is important is not that our objections be confirmed but that Keller's own Reformed theology, reflective as it is of the biblical truth, be transmitted in ways that are completely clear. Such refinement is all the more important given the vast numbers of believers that Dr. Keller influences in this generation, to say nothing of future generations.

On the other hand, it is also possible that this conversation might end up identifying some points at which we actually disagree. However regrettable this would be, such clarity would still be salutary. The world's reaction to critique is often to say that others have 'misunderstood' them even when they have been understood very well; rather than acknowledging legitimate difference, they prefer to imagine that it would be impossible for any thinking person to disagree with them. However, such responses do not befit Christian teachers. Paul and Barnabas, for instance, neither misunderstood each other after their frank conversation about John Mark nor did they claim to be misunderstood; they simply *disagreed* (Acts 15:39). Even this mutual recognition of difference can yet be used for the good and ultimately the unity—as seen in the eventual reconciliation of these men—of the church.

As we close, let us join together with our dear brother Tim Keller to pray that the Word and Spirit would prosper more and more in our lands, that scores of churches preaching the gospel of Christ crucified would be established, and that the Triune God would be worshiped in Spirit and in truth, all to the everlasting glory of God alone.

engaging with KELLER

Tim Keller's name is known across the evangelical world. His work as a pastor-teacher has found expression both in the urban ministries of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, and in his many writings. Keller's books, in turn, have spawned Bible study courses and generated a great measure of discussion about key biblical concepts, as he has sought to make the gospel relevant for a modern generation. In this collection of essays, written from within the same evangelical constituency, several writers engage with different aspects of Keller's thought. While indebted to Keller in many ways, they also wish to examine his position in the light of Scripture and to work constructively as well as critically with his published works. That such an influential figure should be the subject of discussion is not surprising; what will be surprising to many is that not all evangelicals are prepared to accept without question all of Keller's conclusions or formulations. This is a book to stimulate discussion and to remind us that God's Word must always be our final judge in matters of theology, evangelism and apologetics.

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