

Keller Preaching Regeneration

Keller uses today's culture to communicate with his hearers. But he does more: he allows that culture to warp the gospel, and the way he actually addresses sinners with the gospel – and that at the most sensitive and critically defining moment; namely, at the point of regeneration leading to conversion. Indeed, Keller is not merely allowing the culture to do it; he does it; he is responsible.

What impression must this approach to sinners leave in the minds of his hearers? Remember, the great concern is not only what is said, but what is unsaid; even more, it is what the hearers think is being said.

Preachers and writers (and I include myself), must, of course, be clearly scriptural; more, they must do all they can to make sure their hearers are left with no misunderstanding.

Let me give a couple of illustrations from the field of medicine. The slightest adjustment to the ingredients of medication can turn that which is meant to cure, or at least relieve, into something which is lethal. Then again, a physician must ensure that his or her advice is clear, and that patients fully understand what they have been told.¹

The same goes for addressing sinners with the gospel – which, it is surely needless to say, is a far more serious matter than medicine.

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¹ My wife was seen by a hospital consultant whose command of English was poor. Having observed the way the attendant nurse had felt it necessary to clarify the consultant's meaning for the previous patient, I was not surprised, when after a few minutes into my wife's consultation, I was called into the room to interpret for her. Fortunately, I could unravel what the consultant was saying.

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When addressing the unconverted, at the most vital stage Keller fails to make them stop thinking about how to satisfy themselves, and compel them to focus their attention on how God sees them. Indeed, he encourages them to go on thinking about themselves. He knows that many today are looking in the wrong place for their identity, their self-worth, their self-esteem, their happiness. So, tapping into this contemporary culture, fastening on to this desire for happiness, drawing his hearers' attention to the mistake of seeking their desired goal in the wrong place (for Keller, in fact, this is not merely a mistake, but a sin, if not the chief sin), Keller assures them that if they look for their identity, their self-worth, their self-esteem, their happiness in the right place – Christ – and stop looking to their religion, moral rectitude, family, career, romance, qualifications, money or whatever, for it, they will get all the identity – that is, all the self-esteem, self-worth, happiness – they could ever wish for. They don't have to try to earn it. They can't earn it anyway. Being regenerated, they just have to repent and believe Christ, and they will receive a perfect identity; in Keller's favoured catch-phrase: 'Your identity is received, not achieved'. And by 'identity' he really does mean self-worth, happiness, and by 'repentance' he means turning away not only from wrong-doing but, more important, of attempted right-doing; that is, sinners must repent – not of seeking self-worth, but of seeking it in the wrong place. As he said: 'I define sin as building *your identity – your self-worth and happiness* – on anything other than God'.² Repentance, then, can only be regret and remorse for seeking self-esteem in the wrong place, and having a change of heart and mind about it.

Let me explore this.³

If Keller had been speaking about identity in the biblical sense – the sinner's standing before God – he would have

² See the previous chapter.

³ See also the Appendix 'Lloyd-Jones Preaching Regeneration'.

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been right; that is, a sinner's positional sanctification,⁴ a sinner's justification,⁵ is from first to last, 'received, not achieved' – by the sinner, of course. It was 'achieved', earned, merited, by Christ on behalf of the sinner.⁶ Christ became a man under the law (Gal. 4:4) to live and die for sinners that he might accomplish their redemption, and so that the Spirit might apply that redemption to them.

Here is Paul setting out the two identities – the plight of all men in Adam and the righteous status of the elect in Christ.⁷ I have already quoted these verses, but they need to be repeated *and their import fully registered* at this critical point in the argument:

While we were still powerless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die – but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man [Adam], and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned [in Adam, and, following that, in themselves]... If [that is, since], because of one man's [that is, Adam's] trespass, death

⁴ See my *Positional*.

⁵ See my *Justification; Four; Eternal*.

⁶ See my *Imputed*.

⁷ God, on the basis of his grace, justifies, declares righteous, all those sinners who trust the merits, the person and the work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Such sinners are one with Christ. He bore all their sin. They bear all his righteousness. God in Christ decreed it all in eternity, accomplished it on the cross and in the resurrection, and by his Spirit applies it to the elect sinner at the point of faith. And, finally, it can be properly said that all the elect will be ultimately justified when Christ returns. See my *Eternal*.

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reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men [who are in Adam – that is, all men], so one act of righteousness [or, the act of righteousness of one],⁸ leads to justification and life for all men [who are in Christ – that is, the elect]. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous (Rom. 5:6-19).⁹

[God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him [the elect] might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

As Peter said:

Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us [the elect] to God (1 Pet. 3:18).

And in the redemption which Christ wrought, sinners are regenerated, enabled to repent, and brought to faith in Christ, united to him, and thus – in Christ – delivered from all condemnation, free from all accusation, being accounted perfect in the sight of God, never to be separated from the love of God in Christ (Rom. 8:1-4,33-34,36-39). Countless passages of Scripture speak of one or more elements of this glorious work. Yes, this identity – the biblical identity which counts, the believer's standing before God – really, gloriously, is 'received, not achieved'.

Take the biblical doctrine of reconciliation. As John Murray stated:

Reconciliation presupposes disrupted relations between God and men. It implies enmity and alienation. This alienation is twofold – our alienation from God and God's alienation from us. The cause of the alienation is, of course,

⁸ See my *Imputed*.

⁹ I remind you that 'being made righteous' is not only a forensic (legal) term, but far more. See my *Four*.

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our sin, but the alienation consists not only in our unholy enmity against God, but also in God's holy alienation from us. Our iniquities have separated between us and our God and our sins have hid his face [from us] (*cf.* Isa. 59:2).¹⁰

Alienation is the issue, and there are two aspects to it: the sinner's enmity to God, and God's enmity towards the sinner. In everyday-speak – in my relationship to another person – the command to 'be reconciled' implies some movement on both sides, probably with the stress on me and my responsibility to change my attitude towards the other. Speaking biblically, however, this is a misunderstanding of the doctrine of reconciliation. The sinner is commanded to be reconciled (2 Cor. 5:18-19), but the thrust of that command does not centre on the sinner and his attitude towards God, but on God and his attitude to the sinner. The sinner is commanded to welcome God's removal of his wrath towards the sinner, removed through the work of Christ.

This may sound surprising in light of Romans 5:10, 2 Corinthians 5:18-19 and Colossians 1:19-20, so that, as Murray explained, these passages:

...would seem to clinch the argument that the reconciliation terminates upon our enmity against God and not upon his holy alienation from us. And so it has been maintained that when the reconciliation is conceived as action on the part of God it is that which God has done to turn our enmity into love and when it is conceived as result it is the putting away of our enmity against God. Consequently the reconciliation has been construed as consisting in that which God has done so that our enmity may be removed. In a word, the thought is focused on our enmity, and the doctrine of reconciliation is constructed in these terms.

This is wrong. As Murray went on to argue, in Scripture the primary thought in reconciliation is the removal of God's enmity against the sinner:

¹⁰ John Murray: *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*.

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It is this alienation [God's enmity to the sinner] that the reconciliation contemplates and removes.¹¹

That is to say, reconciliation by the death of Christ deals with God's alienation from sinners on account of their sin: God has propitiated his wrath towards his elect by laying that wrath on his Son:

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom. 5:8-11).

In [Christ] all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven,¹² making peace by the blood of his cross. And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him (Col. 1:19-22).

Not only that. God has commissioned his people to take the gospel – ‘the ministry of reconciliation’ – into all the world (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:47), pleading with sinners to ‘be reconciled to God’:

God... through Christ reconciled us [the elect] to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation... Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:18-20).

¹¹ See the full argument in John Murray: *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*.

¹² The phrase ‘all things, whether on earth or in heaven’ is not easy to interpret. It does not mean universal redemption. I suggest its meaning can be found in comparison with Acts 3:21; Rom. 8:19-22; Eph. 1:10; 2 Pet. 3:13.

What – precisely – does this mean? Are we, as believers, to command and urge sinners to stop trying to achieve self-esteem by some relationship, or whatever? The suggestion is ludicrous, and worse. Or should sinners be commanded to give up trying to achieve reconciliation with God, give up all attempts to improve themselves, their hearts, their attitude towards God, and so placate God (which is an impossibility for any sinner),¹³ and receive the reconciliation which Christ accomplished? Yes, indeed! And this means that they must rely upon Christ, trusting him and his work alone for the removal of God’s enmity towards them and his alienation from them.

The notion that this appeal means that the sinner should be thinking about himself and his attitude at this point is quite wrong. He should be thinking about the way God looks at him! The sinner is being called upon to recognise that he is under the wrath of God by nature, without a hope of putting things right, and unless he flees to Christ he will die under that wrath and remain under it forever. It is only by relying entirely on God’s grace in the person, merit and work of Christ that he can be at peace with God.

In short, all this – justification, positional sanctification, reconciliation – has nothing to do with the unregenerate sinner’s self-esteem! It is all to do with how God sees the sinner, and how he deals with him. It is God-centred not man-centred. The believer benefits enormously, of course, and these benefits really are ‘received, not achieved’ by the

¹³ True, God commands sinners to make for themselves a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek. 18:31), even though it is an impossibility. This is the seeming paradox of the gospel call, illustrated in the episodes recorded in Mark 5:35-43; Luke 6:6-11; 7:11-17; John 11:38-44, for instance. The dead cannot respond, the man with the paralysed arm cannot move it, yet Christ commands the impossible. Another seeming paradox in this question of alienation arises in God’s enmity towards sinners and yet his love towards them as expressed in, say, John 3:16. See my *Offer*.

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believer. But the glory of it all belongs to God, not man, and gospel preaching must always be fully consistent with this.

Christ did not suffer the appalling humiliation of becoming incarnate, living for years cheek by jowl with sinners, undergoing the contradiction of sinners against himself (Heb. 12:3), being despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief (Isa. 53:3), brought to agony (Luke 22:44), obedient to a horrific death on the cross (Phil. 2:8), forsaken of his Father (Matt. 27:46), in order to make men feel good about themselves. He became a man so that he might plumb such depths – and descend deeper than we can ever possibly know – in order to earn the necessary glorious righteousness (2 Cor. 5:21), to shed his blood (Rev. 1:5) in bearing God’s wrath (John 1:29; 1 John 2:2) for his people, in order to present them faultless before his Father (Matt. 1:21; Heb. 9:11-14,26; 10:10; Jude 24).

What God demands of sinners and that which gives sinners self-esteem must never be confused. The gospel teacher, out of reverence for the name and glory of the Lord Christ, is duty-bound to watch his every word to make sure that that name is never tarnished or cheapened by any careless turn of phrase. If it is, he is guilty of promulgating a tawdry ‘gospel’. No wonder Paul took pains to explain how much care he took over such things, and why:

My speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom [thinking, concepts, ideas, eyes, systems] of men but in the power of God (1 Cor. 2:4-5).

We can extrapolate from the particular circumstances Paul faced at Corinth, and which provoked his assertion, to preaching in general; indeed, we must apply the principles he so carefully and passionately laid out. In addressing sinners with the gospel, ‘the wisdom of men’ – the thinking of men, their concepts, ideas, systems, how they view the world, their philosophies, what drives and motivates them – must be

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avoided like the plague. Why? Because if man – his ideas, his wisdom, his thinking – is given even the most tenuous of footholds, the merest look-in – everything goes up in smoke. So Paul was convinced. The apostle dreaded the thought that any sinner might come away from his preaching with the slightest sense of resting in man, glorying in man. He was determined (1 Cor. 2:2) to prevent it at all costs, and he made sure that his preaching – both doctrine and manner (1 Cor. 2:2-5) – was fully consistent with his convictions.

Keller, however, shows no such restraint: self is not only paramount in the unregenerate; according to Keller's 'gospel', self rules OK before, during and after regeneration.

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Let's stop skirmishing and get to the heart of the matter; namely, Keller actually preaching on regeneration. We could wish for no clearer example. Here he is on John 3:3-15, under the title of 'You Must Be Born Again':

What does it mean to repent? Of course it means to be sorry for your sins... Yes, of course you are sorry for your sin. [But] the repentance that brings eternal life is not just asking God's forgiveness for your sins... [Nicodemus] had to repent of trying to save himself. This is what it means.

Keller is right to include in a sinner's repentance the sins of self-righteousness and attempted salvation by one's works, but that there is more to Keller's statement than meets the casual eye becomes clear in this unforgettable, demeaning description of the 'traditional' view of repentance. In addition to his disparaging double use of 'of course' in 'Of course [repentance] means to be sorry for your sins... Yes, of course you are sorry for your sin', when he was commenting on the meeting between the father and the returning son in Luke 15, according to Keller, 'the father says':

I'm not going to wait until you've paid off your debt; I'm not going to wait until you've duly grovelled. You are not

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going to earn your way back into the family, I am going to simply take you back.¹⁴

Is ‘grovelling’ a fitting way to talk about repentance? How well does Keller’s talk fit in with what happened to many in the crowd under Peter’s preaching on the day of Pentecost? We read:

When they heard this [Peter’s condemning preaching] they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles: ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’ And Peter said to them: “Repent...” (Acts 2:37-38).

They were ‘cut to the heart’, ‘pierced’, ‘smitten in conscience’ – that is, as various commentators put it, they experienced ‘a sharp painful emotion’, ‘a deep and lively sorrow, and felt such a sense of their enormous guilt’, ‘they were suddenly and deeply affected with anguish and alarm at what Peter had said’, ‘they saw themselves guilty of the crime laid to their charge, and were filled with remorse of conscience for it; they felt pain at their hearts, and much uneasiness, and were seized with horror and trembling; they were wounded in their spirits, being hewn and cut down by the prophets and apostles of the Lord, and slain by the words of his mouth; they were as dead men in their own apprehension; and indeed, a prick, a cut, or wound in the heart is mortal’. In short, they knew – *and felt* – they were in the condemned cell, on death row.¹⁵

And it was on top of that, please note, on top of that, in response to their anguished cry, that Peter commanded them to repent. If Keller had been there, it seems he would have been tugging Peter’s cloak and rebuking him: ‘We don’t want any of this grovelling! Tell them to stop it: at once!’¹⁶

¹⁴ Keller: *The Prodigal God* p23.

¹⁵ See the Appendix ‘Spurgeon on “Cut to the Heart”’.

¹⁶ In all the many references to repentance in Acts – Acts 2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:22; 11:18; 13:24; 17:30; 19:4; 20:21; 26:20 – I can detect no suggestion of any talk of dismissing it as ‘grovelling’.

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Indubitably, in the gospel there can be no talk of the sinner ‘earning his way’, but repentance over sin – both the ‘repentance’ and the ‘sin’ being defined as in Scripture – must never be dismissed as ‘grovelling’.

Taking up where I broke into Keller’s discourse on regeneration, this is how he went on:

[Nicodemus]¹⁷ had to repent of trying to save himself. This is what it means. This is the repentance that brings eternal life, to say: ‘Father, I not only repent for all the bad things I’ve done. I repent for all the bad reasons I did all my good things. All the good things I’ve done, I’ve been doing to control you, or to feel good about myself, or to get other people to look at me. I’ve done bad things, and even the good things I’ve done for bad reasons, and therefore I am spiritually bankrupt. I’m totally spiritually bankrupt. I admit my total absolute helplessness, moral bankruptcy, and need for sheer grace’. That’s the repentance.¹⁸

Do not miss what is being said here. Keller, though he talks of ‘save’, is in fact appealing to the sinner’s desire for happiness, self-esteem, self-worth, and telling him he will find that in Christ. This, according to Keller, is ‘salvation’.

In this way, the sinner’s response to the gospel is made to look like taking up an investment rather than being confronted with a demand; indeed, an essential requirement.¹⁹ The sinner’s mind is centred, not on his standing before God, not on God’s assessment of him, not on his plight as a sinner ruined in Adam under the wrath of a

¹⁷ As I will show, Keller is referring to Spurgeon’s conversion to illustrate Christ’s call to Nicodemus.

¹⁸ Tim Keller: ‘You Must Be Born Again’ 3rd April 2019, Gospel Coalition website.

¹⁹ Conversion involves obedience: ‘It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And “If the righteous is scarcely saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?”’ (1 Pet. 4:17-18).

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holy God, but on himself, his self-interest, his gain, his happiness, and what others think of him.

Is this the gospel? Look at the context of John 3:3-15 (especially verses 16-21), which rings with Christ's liberal use of words like 'condemnation', 'wicked', 'evil', 'perish', 'judgment'. (John 3:36 speaks of 'wrath').

Remember, Keller talks of 'want':

In the cross you actually get... [the] culture... you want.²⁰

But 'want' is not the biblical focus; the sinner must be confronted with his 'need'. Christ did not speak to Nicodemus about what he wanted, what he would like,²¹ but what he needed:

...unless one is born again he cannot... he cannot... You must be born again (John 3:3-7).

Let us get closer to the heart of it. How does Keller's doctrine work out in practice – when he is facing unconverted sinners and preaching the gospel?

I remind you:

That's what the new birth does, it gives you a new sensibility and identity... What is your identity? Your identity has to be rooted in something. Your identity is a sense of self and a sense of worth.

A new sensibility and a new identity.

²⁰ 'Tim Keller on How to Bring the Gospel to Post-Christian America' 11th May 2020. I have taken this from a posted transcript.

²¹ See my *Dilemma; Confront*. Christ's preaching drove his hearers away, many of whom wanted to kill him (Luke. 4:28-29; John 6:60-66). A friend gave me this quote from Steve Lawson: 'The problem with preachers today is that nobody wants to kill them any more'. The truth is, the problem with preachers today is that so many of them are not saying anything that makes anybody want to kill them any more.

A new sensibility

What is Keller's concept of the 'before' and 'after' in this matter of 'sensibility'? This:

The new birth starts to reorder the loves of your heart because these things that you might have read in the Bible you've heard about all your life but were nothing but abstractions, become realities. But that's just the heart. There's also something that goes on in the mind. There's an awful lot of truths in the Bible that just don't make sense to the un-illuminated mind. They don't make sense...²²

Once again, we must be absolutely clear what we are talking about. What does Keller mean by 'the reordering' of the unregenerate sinner's 'loves'? What 'loves' does the unregenerate sinner have? Love for God himself, love for Christ, love for the gospel? That's what God demands for a start. Does the unregenerate sinner manifest those 'loves'? Let's remind ourselves of his 'loves':

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen...

²² Tim Keller: 'You Must Be Born Again' 3rd April 2019, Gospel Coalition website.

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And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Rom. 1:18-32).

What 'loves' are these! Let me take the liberty of putting the apostle's words into the present:

By their unrighteousness the unregenerate suppress the truth... They do not honour God as God or give thanks to him, but they become futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts are darkened. Claiming to be wise, they become fools, and exchange the glory of the immortal God for images... They exchange the truth about God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator... They do not see fit to acknowledge God... [They have] a debased mind... They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness.

These are the 'loves' of the unregenerate – suppressing the truth, not honouring God, not giving thanks to him, futile in thought, foolish or atheistical in heart, idolatrous, bragging, God-reducing, God-rejecting, truth-rejecting, lie-loving, creature-worshipping, hating. This is what makes the unregenerate tick. Such 'loves' do not need to 'reordered'. They need to confronted and obliterated.²³ The unregenerate need to repent of their evil 'loves'; they need them washed away in the blood of the Lamb. And 'the creature' they love above all other 'loves' is 'self'; 'self' is 'the creature' they 'love' (Keller's word) above God – 'the creature' they 'worship' (Paul's word) above God. And it is the 'love' of 'self', the 'worship' of 'self', that must be dealt with.

²³ See my *Confront*.

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Sin is not self-seeking in the wrong way; it is self-seeking, full stop! Indeed, it is self. An unregenerate sinner may have his way of seeking his self-esteem ‘reordered’, even fixed on a new object, even the best of all ‘objects’, but so what? He is still unregenerate, living according to the flesh, and as long as he remains in that condition he will never see or enter the kingdom. He is still taken up with self-esteem or whatever.

As Scripture states:

Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law;²⁴ indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Rom. 8:6-8).

We ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another (Tit. 3:3).

The unregenerate sinner has a hard, bitter, resentful, malicious, hating heart – especially towards God, Christ and the gospel. By regenerating the sinner, God gives him a new, soft, warm, feeling, submissive heart, a heart, mind, will, disposition and attitude to submit to God in Christ, to trust and obey him in the gospel:

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.²⁵ And I will put my

²⁴ In the days of the old covenant, ‘the law’ was the law of Moses; in the days of the new covenant it is the law of Christ. See my *Christ*.

²⁵ ‘A heart of flesh’ here does not mean a heart that is carnal; it is the opposite of ‘a heart of stone’, and so means ‘a living, feeling, sensitive heart’.

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Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezek. 36:26-27).

God even writes these laws in the sinner's heart in regenerating him:

I will put my law²⁶ in their minds and write it on their hearts (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10; 10:16).

Reordering the unregenerate sinner's 'loves' indeed! The unregenerate sinner needs a new heart. He needs new 'loves' altogether!

In Keller's model, the unregenerate are silly, but in regeneration they are made sensible; having been previously misguided, mistaken, off course, off target, they are put on the right road; formerly confused, they are straightened out – 'reordered'; having been living in a fog, they are brought into sunlight. And it's all about finding the right way to get self-esteem! In other words, the greatest idol of them all – self – is not only left intact, it is exalted.

How very different to the way the Bible talks about regeneration! In Scripture, the dead are made to live, those who hate God are made to love him, those who refuse Christ's offer of salvation are made to delight in it and welcome it, those who reject him are made to submit to him, the blind are made to see, the deaf enabled to hear. The unregenerate sinner hates God, despises the gospel, thinks it foolish; it is not that he merely fails to see where his best self-interest lies.

Let me make it personal: in regeneration, it is not merely that I have had my old, mistaken idea of seeking happiness and self-worth corrected, tinkered with, set right, so that now I stop trying to achieve my identity – my self-worth, my self-esteem and happiness – and simply believe and receive it in

²⁶ Although this prophecy was issued in the days of the old covenant, it refers to the new. Consequently, the law in question is not the law of Moses but the law of Christ. See my *Christ*.

Christ. No! I – I myself – have been radically changed, root and branch; it is not merely a change in the thing I hoped would give me happiness. I myself have been changed. Many describe this as being given ‘a new nature’, and while I sympathise, I cannot agree with this terminology.²⁷ I – even when I was unregenerate and now I am regenerate – have always had, and always will have, a human nature; that is unchanged.²⁸ But in my regeneration, I have been given a new heart, a new will, a new mind, a new disposition, a new attitude, a new approach, a new desire, a new spirit. In my regeneration, all things – except my human nature – have been changed, have become new; I myself – I myself – am a new creature, a new creation. Old things have passed away:

If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God (2 Cor. 5:17-18).

The key biblical phrase for this glorious transformation is ‘but now’ (or its equivalent).²⁹ The believer once was, but now is...:

Since, therefore, we have *now* been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of

²⁷ I could put this more strongly, but to develop the argument would take me beyond the remit of this book. In brief, the ‘two-nature’ concept can easily become an escape route for believers to evade their responsibility for progressive sanctification. When it does, it is toxic. See my *Fivefold; Liberty*.

²⁸ ‘[God] has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature’ (2 Pet. 1:4) does not mean that the regenerate are deified. See my *Eternal*.

²⁹ This biblical phrase is one of the most important terms in Scripture, especially in the history of redemption through covenants. See Rom. 3:21; 5:9-11; 6:22; 7:6; 8:1; 11:30; 11:31 (second ‘now’ in NIV, NASB); 16:26; along with John 15:22,24; Acts 17:30; 1 Cor. 15:20; Gal. 4:9; Eph. 2:12-13; 5:8; Col. 1:26; 3:8; Heb. 8:6; 9:26; 12:26; 1 Pet. 2:10. See my *Christ; Redemption*. For the comments of others, see my *Christ* pp378-379. But for my purpose in this book, the ‘but now’ is vital in personal experience.

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God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, *now* that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have *now* received reconciliation (Rom. 5:9-11).

Now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life (Rom. 6:22).

While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. *But now* we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code (Rom. 7:5-6).

There is therefore *now* no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:1-2).

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods. *But now* that you have come to know God, or rather to be known by God, how can you turn back again to the weak and worthless elementary principles of the world, whose slaves you want to be once more? (Gal. 4:8-9).

Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called the uncircumcision by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands – remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. *But now* in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ (Eph. 2:11-13).

At one time you were darkness, *but now* you are light in the Lord (Eph. 5:8).

In these [idolatrous practices] you too once walked, when you were living in them. *But now...* (Col. 3:7-8).

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But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, *but now* you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, *but now* you have received mercy (1 Pet. 2:9-10).

As William Tidd Matson put it:

*Lord! I was blind; I could not see
In your marred visage any grace;
But now the beauty of your face
In radiant vision dawns on me!*

*Lord! I was deaf; I could not hear
The thrilling music of your voice;
But now I hear you and rejoice,
And all your uttered words are dear!*

*Lord! I was dumb; I could not speak
The grace and glory of your name;
But now, as touched with living flame,
My lips your eager praises wake!*

*Lord! I was dead; I could not stir
My lifeless soul to come to you;
But now since you have quickened me
I rise from sin's dark sepulchre!*

*For you have made the blind to see,
The deaf to hear, the dumb to speak,
The dead to live; and lo,³⁰ you broke
The chains of my captivity!*

This talk of the blind seeing surely reminds us of another hymn writer – John Newton – with his:

*Amazing grace (how sweet the sound)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost; but now am found!
Was blind, but now I see.*

Even more important, let us return to the source – the miraculous cure by Christ of the blind man as recorded in

³⁰ I would make it 'and thus you broke/ The chains of my captivity!'

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John 9. He had been born blind, and he was made to see. He was not a short-sighted man who had been given spectacles; he was not a man with blurred vision corrected and focused; he was not looking in the wrong place, with a kind of squint. He was blind, and by a sovereign, miraculous creative act of Christ he was given sight. That morning he had woken a blind man; when he went to bed that evening, he was a man who could see. What a breath-taking change! Such, spiritually, is what happens to the sinner in regeneration leading to conversion.

And this has taken us to ‘identity’ – ‘the new identity’ – we receive in regeneration and conversion.

A new identity

We have seen what Keller understands by ‘a new identity’. How does it show itself when he reaches the critical point in his preaching?

Keller has not left us in doubt: he illustrated his meaning by the experience of a woman who had had five identities (all of which failed to give her the desired sense of self-worth) – until at last she discovered a sixth. In developing the story, Keller made everything crystal clear. This woman ‘had had five identities in her life’ – ‘I’, she said, ‘felt good about myself because ...’... ‘She felt good about herself because she was...’... ‘Now’, she said, ‘I feel pretty good about myself because...’... ‘Now I felt good about myself because I was...’.

Keller went on. ‘These were her words to me’:

‘First I thought I was somebody because I was moral. Then I thought I was somebody because I was beautiful. Then I thought I was somebody because I was successful. Then I thought I was somebody because I was helpful’. And then she heard the gospel message, and she realised: ‘I’ve been trying to save myself. These identities don’t work’. And she gave herself to Christ. And she said: ‘God loves me because of what Jesus has done, not what I’ve done’. And every other identity she had tried had been based on her own

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performance – and all the ups and downs and the whiplashes she was experiencing during all those efforts at a different identity – and finally, finally she could rest.³¹

Clearly, this is only replacing five failed attempts at self-esteem – with yet another – Christ. *But, all the same, it is still self-esteem, still a sense of self-worth, still feeling good about oneself.* This, according to Keller, is what the gospel is about – especially at the critical point of regeneration and conversion leading to salvation.

Let me repeat something I said earlier. Sin is not self-seeking in the wrong way; it is self-seeking, full stop! Indeed, it is self. An unregenerate sinner may have his way of seeking his self-esteem ‘reordered’, even fixed on a new object, even the best of all ‘objects’, but so what? He is still unregenerate, living according to the flesh, and as long as he remains in that condition he will never see or enter the kingdom. This woman had had plenty of ‘reordering’ before she met Keller. True, after meeting Keller, she had yet another ‘reordering’. Whether or not this sixth ‘reordering’ was regeneration is the question. And it is a big one.

The ‘reordering’ that regeneration leading to conversion produces means that the one who was in the flesh is now in the spirit, one who had been born a child of the devil is now reborn as a child of God, a former slave of sin has now become a slave of Christ, one who was unrighteous is now made righteous, one who was in Adam is now in Christ. No unregenerate sinner can effect such a radical ‘reordering’. It is a sovereign act of God in creating power.

We need to pause, and gather breath. We need to do more: we need to compare – contrast is a more fitting word – Keller’s approach with that of preachers we meet in Scripture.

³¹ Tim Keller: ‘You Must Be Born Again’ 3rd April 2019, Gospel Coalition website.