

Keller's Approach Contrasted with Scripture

Even making all due allowance for the passage of 2000 years, changes in cultural aspirations, and so on, since man is the same as he has been since the Fall, and since the gospel is unchangeable, the essence of what is preached must likewise remain unchanged. Essential key words – scriptural words and all their meanings – must not be lost; words such as propitiation, wrath, condemnation, justification, repentance, faith, redemption, atonement, and the like. They contain and convey the essence of the gospel. If they are lost, all is lost. Moreover, we have to insist on the biblical realities these words speak of.¹ The crux of the problem is not losing merely the vocabulary; the essence of the gospel is intimately tied into the language.

It is time we applied this principle to Keller's preaching of the gospel at the point of conversion.

Let me remind you of the way the preachers in the Bible went about their work. Did any of them talk in terms of the sinner's sense of worth, self-esteem and happiness at that climacteric?

As for Christ himself, take John 3:3-21.² For the purpose of this book, it is the principal passage – not only is it the major scriptural passage, but we have access to Keller preaching on regeneration from John 3:3-15. But before we get to Christ addressing Nicodemus, let me glance at the preaching of some others.

For the preaching of John the Baptist, see Matthew 3:1-12; Luke 3:1-20; John 1:1-36; 3:27-36.

¹ See my *Dilemma*.

² It does not really matter where the quotation ends, but I take it to be at the end of verse 21.

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For Peter, take Acts 2, 3, 4 and 10. When Peter commanded his hearers to 'repent... for the forgiveness of your sins' (Acts 2:38), what 'sins' did he have in mind? Was it their wrong sense, their misguided sense, of self-worth? Not at all! It was this:

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know – this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men [that is, by Gentile hands] (Acts 2:22-23).

It was their sinful works stemming from their sinful hearts, their hatred of Christ – that was their sin, not a misguided sense of self-worth. And when Peter was addressing the Jews and commanded them: 'Repent therefore, and turn back, that your sins may be blotted out' (Acts 3:19), what 'sins' was he thinking of? 'You Jews are looking for happiness, and self-worth – perfectly proper, of course – but in the wrong place'? No! It was their response to Christ, their guilt:

...Jesus, whom you delivered over and denied in the presence of Pilate, when he had decided to release him. But you denied the holy and righteous one, and asked for a murderer to be granted to you, and you killed the author of life, whom God raised from the dead... God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness (Acts 3:13-15,26).

Peter was not limiting this to those who were literally responsible for Christ's sufferings, but he was addressing the thousands before him, and doing so promiscuously. In other words, allowing for the special circumstances of the day in question, the principles always apply. And one of those principles is 'your wickedness', not 'your misplaced sense of self-worth'.

No wonder Peter continued to preach in the way he did:

Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead – by him this man is standing before

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you well. This Jesus is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone. And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:10-12).

[Christ] 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. To him all the [old-covenant] prophets [of Israel] bear witness, that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:42-43).

For Philip, take Acts 8.

For Paul, see Acts 13 to 28. When the jailer asked Paul and Silas: 'Sirs, what must I do to be saved?', they replied: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved' (Acts 16:30-31). Were the two prisoners concerned for the wretched man's misplaced sense of self-worth, and telling him to look to Christ for his self-esteem?

As for the apostolic letters, naturally – since they were written to believers – while we should not expect to find many passages which deal with evangelistic addresses, even so, we are given overwhelming evidence of the kind of material they would have used in their discourses. I make no apology for quoting the following examples, and doing so at length; I want to let Scripture speak for itself,³ both in word and weight:

We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade others...

We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God... Behold, now is the favourable time;

³ In his *The Prodigal God*, Keller makes frequent use of novelists, playwrights, and the like.

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behold, now is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 5:10-11,19 – 6:2).

You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

The day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying: 'There is peace and security', then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pains come upon a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you are not in darkness, brothers, for that day to surprise you like a thief. For you are all children of light, children of the day. We are not of the night nor of the darkness. So then let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us so that whether we are awake [are living] or asleep [have died] we might live with him (1 Thess. 4:16 – 5:10).

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. But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people (Tit. 3:3-8).

[Christ] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls...

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Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit...

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. 1:18-21; 2:7-10,24-25; 3:18; 4:17-18).

No creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account (Heb. 4:13).

These extracts, please note, tell us what the biblical writers wrote (and often preached) to saints. It doesn't take an Einstein to see what they said to unbelievers, and how they said it.

And we have Paul's testimony of his conversion. Did his main pre-regeneration trouble lie in the wrong way he was pursuing a sense of self-worth? Was he awakened at Damascus to the need to change – not in the seeking of self-worth itself (which, according to Keller, would have been perfectly fine), but in seeking it from his works and zeal? Or was he himself changed, changed completely? We don't have to guess:

Formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life (1 Tim. 1:13-16).

No wonder that Paul was adamant that being 'in Christ' means that the sinner is a new creature or new creation (2 Cor. 5:17)! In saying that, he was certainly speaking from experience. A mere change of object in the pursuit for self-

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esteem would not remotely have fitted the bill for him. Nor will it for any sinner today!⁴

It is worse than that. Consider how the apostle had just described conversion:

God, who said: 'Let light shine out of darkness', has shone in our hearts to give [us] the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

Can you imagine him saying:

God, who said: 'Let light shine out of darkness', has shone in our hearts to give [us] the one true way of receiving self-worth – in the face of Jesus Christ?⁵

If we compare the tone of the scripture extracts quoted since the start of this chapter with Keller's view on regeneration leading to conversion – as we must – the contrast is at once palpable.⁶

Keller makes the new birth so carnal, so pleasant in fulfilling men's aspirations, feeling good about oneself, no pain or cost involved. 'You foolish sinners have been looking in the

⁴ See Appendix: 'Spurgeon's Conversion in his Own Words' for more on 'being a new creature in Christ'.

⁵ Compare D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones's sermon on 2 Cor. 4:6: 'The State of Man'.

⁶ Let me repeat an earlier paragraph on the reaction of those who were affected by Peter's preaching (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'.

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wrong direction for self-fulfilment; that's your trouble, that's your sin; stop making that mistake; repent of that folly and receive your identity from Christ, not your works; and be happy ever after'. As we have seen, in Keller's own words, his view is:

You've actually got to find a way to take the plot line of the culture, and give it a happy ending in Jesus.⁷

A proper man-centred fairy story!

Would Paul have recognised it? Remember, he is the man who wrote this:

The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of *the glory of Christ*, who is the image of God... God, who said: 'Let light shine out of darkness', has shone in our hearts to give [us] the light of the knowledge of *the glory of God* in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

* * *

Now for the major passage in this chapter: Christ confronting Nicodemus (and he did confront him!).

How abrupt Christ was, how rough – rude – his intervention, cutting right across the man, interrupting him in full flow! No softly, softly about Christ, easing the interview into a nice, pleasant, gentle conversation. Far from it! Having broken into Nicodemus' speech, he bluntly told him he needed to be regenerated – if not, he would never see the kingdom, let alone enter it:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again [regenerated] he cannot see the kingdom of God... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the

⁷ 'Tim Keller on How to Bring the Gospel to Post-Christian America' 11th May 2020. I have taken this from a posted transcript.

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Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you: 'You must be born again' (John 3:3-7).

Did Nicodemus exclaim: 'How wonderful! I see it now. I can receive a new identity. What a fool I've been – struggling to get a sense of self-worth during all these years of observance as a religious Jew! I can receive a proper sense of self-worth just by believing? My self-esteem comes by receiving, not achieving? Great! Put my name down! Count me in!'

Is that what Christ was talking about? Was that the response he was looking for? (Rhetorical questions, both of them, does it need to be said?).

Christ pressed on:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God (John 3:14-21).⁸

And if we go on to the end of the chapter:

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:36).

⁸ As I have noted, it does not really matter where the quotation ends, but I take it to be at the end of verse 21.

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What was the burden of Christ's address to this unregenerate man? Clearly, he must be regenerated. This was where Christ opened, and opened without the slightest preamble. Without regeneration, there is no hope for the man; nothing remains for Nicodemus but, being forever outside the kingdom, he will perish, he will have to endure the everlasting wrath of God; indeed, he is already condemned and under that wrath.

But there is hope! In this wonderful passage, Christ spelled out the unregenerate sinner's responsibility: he must trust the Saviour – Christ. If he does trust Christ, he is assured of everlasting salvation; God sent his Son into the world in order to save sinners from his wrath. But if the sinner refuses, he is – not merely will be – he is already condemned under God's wrath as a sinner, especially condemned for not trusting Christ, and if he dies in that state, he will perish forever.⁹ The overall thrust? Trust Christ and trust him now!

Let me point out a few obvious negatives. There is nothing here along the lines: 'If you trust the Redeemer you will get that wonderful identity – self-esteem – that you have been searching for. If you don't, you will never get the best self-esteem, real happiness, but you will always be struggling with aims and hopes which will end in disappointment'.

Not at all!

Rather it is: 'Unless you are born again, brought to trust Christ, you will perish. You dare not delay. Lack of trust in Christ does not leave you neutral: your unbelief, your lack of trust in Christ, is your highest sin. Guilty in Adam, guilty in yourself, you stand doubly condemned under the wrath of God. Unless you are changed, regenerated by the Spirit and brought savingly to Christ, you will be lost forever. But trust

⁹ Christ does not take up the seeming paradox of how an unregenerate sinner can believe. Nor should any preacher get involved in that issue at this stage in addresses to sinners. See my *Offer; Septimus; No Safety; Eternal; Victorian*.

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the Saviour, rely upon his finished work, and everlasting life will be yours'. This is what we read in John 3:3-21.

Now listen to Keller addressing the unconverted at this very sensitive point, and on this very passage.¹⁰ Keller:

But don't you see what it means to receive rights as children of God? You're not on the spectrum. You're off the spectrum. Your identity is received, not achieved. Your identity is rooted in God's love for you and the fact that God is now your Father, not just your boss, not just your king. He is that, but he's your Father. There's an unconditionality as it were to his regard for you. And that is so different from any other kind of identity. You've got a new identity, and it's remarkable. It's nothing like anything that you've ever had before.¹¹

This, I submit, bears no resemblance to what we read in John 3.

Let me explain. In itself, what Keller said would be fine if it was being said to believers – but since it is being said in addressing the unconverted¹² in a discourse on the necessity of regeneration, it ought to have been heavily protected by preaching which is unmistakably discriminating, distinguishing, separating – preaching which makes it clearer than noonday that unless the hearers have been brought into Christ they are still in Adam and under the wrath of God. And before they can enjoy the benefits of being in Christ, they must be sure that they are in Christ. They must have money in the bank before they can draw on it. Once a sinner has been regenerated, been brought to repentance and trust in Christ and so be in Christ, then – *but only then* – can he think in terms of what he is and what he has in Christ. If this nuance is not handled with the greatest care, and the prerequisite of a thoroughgoing change by the work of the

¹⁰ Keller's text actually stops at verse 15. Why?

¹¹ Tim Keller: 'You Must Be Born Again' 3rd April 2019, Gospel Coalition website.

¹² If it is said that Keller was addressing a conference for believers, he was, at this point, showing how to address the unconverted.

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sovereign Spirit is not sufficiently stressed, the risk is that gospel preaching becomes man-centred not God-centred.¹³

In Keller's case, as we have seen, this care is missing. He preceded the above by asking: 'What does the new birth bring?', with the reply: 'Sensibility, but also identity', leading to a passage dealing with the birth of a baby. It was followed by the lengthy illustration of the woman with five identities, then – after meeting Keller – a sixth. The point is, it is all to do with benefit, the sense of self. What does he say – in all the discourse – on 'perish', 'wrath', 'judgment', 'condemnation'? Nothing! Nothing whatsoever!

There is a further twist. It surfaces when Keller is dealing with the brass snake on the pole (John 3:14-15).¹⁴ Keller:

Israel had sinned. And God sent a plague of snakes, venomous snakes, and they bit them and they were dying. And in a sense, the venom represented sin in their life. Basically, the venom represented in their bodies what was killing them in their soul. And what Moses was told to do was to take a bronze serpent – an image of the thing that was killing them – put it up on a pole (you know, 'as Moses lifted up the serpent'), and all they had to do was look... because some of them were so sick, and so immobilised, they couldn't possibly go over to it and rub it or touch it or any of that. All you have to do is look.

¹³ When it does, the following words, written more than half a century ago, apply. In his introduction to The Banner of Truth's republication of John Owen's *Death of Death...*, J.I.Packer wrote: 'The new gospel conspicuously fails... to make men God-centred in their thoughts and God-fearing in their hearts because this is not primarily what it is trying to do. One way of stating the difference between it and the old gospel is to say that it is too exclusively concerned to be "helpful" to man – to bring peace, comfort, happiness, satisfaction – and too little concerned to glorify God'.

¹⁴ There is a close parallel in the cities of refuge (Josh. 20:1-9; Heb. 6:18). The offender was in immediate danger of death; he had to flee at once to the place of safety; his self-esteem did not come into it. For more, see 'Refuge' on my sermonaudio.com page.

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And this text says that's an image of what it means to repent and believe. By far, the most memorable exposition of this whole idea is Charles Spurgeon's conversion story. Do you know it?

Let me break in. I am not nit-picking when I say that looking to the brass snake speaks of saving faith. Of course, this includes repentance, but the thrust of the illustration is faith. Repentance is not mentioned once in John 3:9-21. Not once! It is faith, trust: 'faith', 'believe', 'receive' and the like, are mentioned, and more than mentioned – see verses 11, 12 (twice), 15, 16, and 18 (three times); trust in Christ is the great issue here. The same goes for an earlier extract from John:

[Christ] was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God (John 1:10-13).

The issue is 'knowing' Christ, 'receiving' him, 'believing'.

In John 3, Christ is explicit:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life (John 3:14-15).

Why is Keller so eager to force repentance into the frame? and do it so blatantly in the face of the text of Scripture? The truth is, Keller does not merely bring repentance into the picture; he is bent on moving the focus of Christ's discourse to his own particular definition of repentance.

Keller, giving a detailed account of C.H.Spurgeon's conversion, winds up with the way the preacher that snowy morning addressed Spurgeon directly:

'Young man, you look miserable. And you're going to be miserable. You are going to be miserable in life and death if you don't obey my text'. And at that moment (this is what

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Spurgeon said), he suddenly realised. He said: 'I was ready to have somebody tell me to do fifty things in order to get salvation'. He was looking for something to do in order to get salvation. I guess he probably thought of God as the Wizard of Oz. You know: 'Go get me the broomstick of the wicked witch of the West,' or something like that. He said: 'I was ready to be told, you have to do these fifty things'. And suddenly he realised: 'I just have to look'. And he realised he'd been looking to himself. And this is what he says: 'Oh, I looked! And I looked! Until I could have almost looked my eyes away'.

Of course. The point Spurgeon was making was that, at last, after much painful struggling in ignorance, he had come to see what he needed to do in order to be saved – trust Christ and give up trying to get himself right with God. More, he actually did exercise saving faith that very morning; that very moment, he did trust in Christ – he looked to him to save him in particular.¹⁵

But listen to what Keller deduces:

See, what is repentance? Yes, of course you are sorry for your sin. The repentance that brings eternal life is not just asking God's forgiveness for your sins. He'd [that is, Spurgeon] already done that. He'd been doing that and doing that and doing that. He 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.¹⁶

¹⁵ So important is this issue, please read Spurgeon's own account in the Appendix 'Spurgeon's Conversion in His Own Words'.

¹⁶ Tim Keller: 'You Must Be Born Again' 3rd April 2019, Gospel Coalition website.

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At a quick glance it appears that Keller is sounding the right note here, but is he? No! He is overlaying John 3:14-15 with his own template, reading what he wants into the illustration – namely, his redefinition of repentance (‘All the good things I’ve done, I’ve been doing to control you, or to feel good about myself’) – and then reading it out. It is, according to Keller, all about repentance – *Keller's kind of repentance* – and it is only when he has got that firmly on the agenda that he states: ‘And then there’s the faith’. And by ‘then’, he means ‘next in my [Keller’s] template’.

Can Keller give us any extract from Spurgeon where he himself talks as Keller does about that morning’s experience? Here is Spurgeon’s own account in his autobiography:

I saw what a Saviour Christ was... Now I can never tell you how it was, but I no sooner saw whom I was to believe than I also understood what it was to believe, and I did believe in one moment.

I am not playing down the necessity of biblical repentance. Not at all! Nothing could be further from the truth. Saving repentance and saving trust are Siamese twins; they cannot be separated; both are essential.¹⁷ But I am doing what every preacher and writer must do – dealing with the text. And in the text of Christ’s discourse, repentance – let alone Keller’s redefinition of repentance – is not mentioned. It is faith – trust – from first to last.

As we have seen, in Keller’s scheme regeneration means that sinners repent of seeking their self-esteem by their efforts, and receive it by faith in Christ: self-esteem is ‘received, not achieved’.

But there is not the faintest hint of a suggestion that any of this occurred to anybody – principally the preacher and

¹⁷ See my *Offer*.

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Spurgeon – in that chapel that snowy morning.¹⁸ Where is the evidence to show that Spurgeon was preoccupied with it that morning, and had been in that state for months?¹⁹

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Here is the fault line in Keller's system. It may, at first, appear to be a faint crack, but in reality it is a gaping chasm. Pagan culture is preoccupied with self-identity. Keller latches on to that in order to communicate with unbelievers. But in his preaching, he panders to the sinner's self-interest, self-perception. I detect little attempt – if any – to persuade sinners to see themselves as God sees them, and – especially – as the one to whom they have to give account.

What makes me feel good about myself is one thing, but I need to have my mind and heart set on God, and how I stand in his sight and estimate. This is not primarily a matter of feeling. Of course feeling comes into it – and Keller is excellent at dealing with the believer's joy – but the sinner needs to know and feel that he is outside Christ, 'separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and [a stranger] to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world' (Eph. 2:12), one 'who [has] no hope' (1 Thess. 4:13). As Paul could write to believers – believers, I stress, not unbelievers:

Formerly, when you did not know God, you were enslaved to those that by nature are not gods (Gal. 4:8; see 1 Thess. 4:5).

¹⁸ As for those Israelites who were dropping like flies in the desert, the suggestion that self-esteem was on their minds, let alone uppermost, is risible. Does anybody think that Moses urged them to look to the brass snake because he was concerned that they were looking in the wrong direction for self-esteem? They were dying for their sin – their rebellion, their cursing – under the wrath of God. Flee – by looking to the brass snake – from wrath.

¹⁹ For more on this see my discourses under John 3 on my sermonaudio.com page, especially 'Look and Live!'; 'Shadow: The Snake Pole'.

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A preacher can make powerful use of that text when addressing unbelievers, of course, by stressing that though they are enslaved by sin in their present state, they will be set free if they trust Christ. The unregenerate sinner must be brought to know and feel this in both respects: he must have a sense of the wrath of God, be convicted by the Spirit of his sin, especially his sin of unbelief (John 3:18; 16:8-9), be brought to biblical repentance and faith, before he can experience the joy of the believer, but the moment he is converted all that joy will be his.

Self-perception, what is in it for me, what will make me feel good about myself, may be uppermost in the sinner's mind, but the preacher's job is to force him to see himself as God sees him, and – especially – as the one to whom he has to give account:

The eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth (2 Chron. 16:9).

The LORD looks down from heaven; he sees all the children of men; from where he sits enthroned he looks out on all the inhabitants of the earth, he who fashions the hearts of them all and observes all their deeds (Ps. 33:13-15).

O LORD, you have searched me and known me! You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O LORD, you know it altogether. You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me. Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high; I cannot attain it. Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me. If I say: 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night, even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you. For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's

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womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them... Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! (Ps. 139:1-16,23-24).

Keller quite rightly says we must confront the idols, idols such as beauty, reason, science,²⁰ money, achievement, career, and so, and 'we have to go after them'.²¹ So we must. But the greatest idol of all is self – self-esteem. As Martin Luther said, self is the great pope. Yet Keller, despite his repeated emphasis against idolatry, at the most sensitive point when addressing unbelievers actually boosts the unregenerate sinner's most prominent and pervasive idol of the lot; namely, seeking a first-class identity, self-esteem. Keller does not, in his own words, 'go after' self-esteem, but replaces self-esteem attempted by self-effort, money or whatever, with self-esteem in Jesus – and calling this 'salvation'. *But, when all is said and done, it is still self-esteem.* The idol – self – is still intact, in pole position. Did Jesus live and die to redeem sinners from a misplaced self-esteem?

Tragic – and worse!

And yet Keller can write this:

The secret to [that is, behind] change is to identify and dismantle the counterfeit gods of your heart... In the Bible... turning from idols always includes a rejection of the culture that the idols produce... There is no way to challenge idols

²⁰ For C.S.Lewis on making an idol of science and the scientist, see 'The Magician's Twin: C.S.Lewis and the Case against Scientism' 18th Nov. 2012.

²¹ Tim Keller: 'The Grand Demythologizer: The Gospel and Idolatry' 24th March 2014.

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without doing cultural criticism, and there is no way to do cultural criticism without discerning and challenging idols.²²

Having said that, the subtitle of the book from which that extract is taken gives the game away. Keller is referring to gods such as *Love, Money and Power*. True enough, they are idols, gods. But the greatest of all idols – self, self-seeking, seeking self-satisfaction – Keller leaves untouched; rather, tinkering with the way sinners seek self-esteem, he leaves the god, the idol, not only untouched, but enforced. Thus the gospel is reduced to spiritual narcissism, a confirmation of the unregenerate sinner's self-absorption, self-importance, egotism, self-satisfaction: only – and this, according to Keller, is the core of the 'gospel' – stop working for it; receive it in Christ.

Is this not the very doctrine which the apostle rebuked? Hear him warning Timothy – and us:

Understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty. For people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having the appearance of godliness, but denying its power. Avoid such people (2 Tim. 3:1-5).

What a list of idols! This is idolatry! Lovers of this and that 'rather than lovers of God'. And what does the apostle put at the head of the list? 'Lovers of self'!

Keller panders to that love, massages it. And it is a disaster.

* * *

²² Timothy Keller: *Counterfeit Gods: When the Empty Promises of Love, Money and Power Let You Down*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2010, pp166-167.

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Keller knows he faces criticism, especially that his teaching amounts to a 'watered-down gospel'. He answers it thus:

I do think that what they [his critics] are getting at there is [that] we may be over-adapting to the identity narrative. The identity narrative is you [have] got to be true to yourself, and you've got to feel good about yourself. It's possible that you start to adapt the gospel, and turn it into something where Jesus just makes you feel good about yourself – and by the way, what I did there a minute ago or a few minutes ago about how you would talk about the Christian identity, unless you're careful it can really sound like Jesus is here to boost your self-esteem.²³

Spot on! This is precisely my criticism: Keller 'boosts the sinner's self-esteem'. But since, as we have seen, he talks about (and, in particular, in the conversation from which this extract is taken, has been talking about) 'self-esteem', 'identity' and 'being born again' all lumped together, who can wonder at it? Keller might, but I – and (obviously) others – do not!

Keller:

I've seen youth groups where people are told you find your identity in Christ, which means God loves you even if you screw up, he just loves you all the time, and you should feel good about yourself, and not hate yourself, and it actually just becomes, not an understanding of how your whole life is reordered by the gospel. It's like Jesus basically makes you feel better about yourself as you... And that's [a] watered-down gospel, which is more of a self-esteem-ism... and I think that's probably what they're getting at. That's a concern of mine too.²⁴

A classic case of trying to close the stable door when the horse has bolted, Keller having given the animal a good whack with the whip across its hind quarters to send it

²³ 'Tim Keller on How to Bring the Gospel to Post-Christian America'.

²⁴ 'Tim Keller on How to Bring the Gospel to Post-Christian America'.

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careering on its way! Self-esteem is what Keller preaches, and – surprise, surprise – self-esteem is the result. ‘Light the blue touch paper, then retire’.