

The Issue Stated

When Timothy Keller moved to New York in the late 1980s, he was surprised, he reports, to find in his congregation:

...many people who had been raised in churches and devout families and had come to New York city to get as far away from them as possible... The most common examples... were the many young adults who had come from the more conservative parts of the U.S... Here [in New York undergraduate schools] they met the kind of person they had been warned about for years, those with liberal views on sex, politics and culture. Despite what they had been led to believe, those people were kind, reasonable and open-hearted.¹

As Keller recognised, both sorts – the liberals and the conservatives – were wrong, mistaken in their views, were ‘lost’ and needed to be ‘saved’. Furthermore, he saw both, in turn, pictured by the two brothers – the younger and the elder – in Christ’s parable in Luke 15. And this chimed in with a sermon preached by Edmund P.Clowney that he had heard thirty years before; as Keller put it, this sermon ‘changed the way I understood Christianity’.² So important was this 1980s realisation to him, not only did it affect the way he preached, but in 2010 he published his findings in a book on Luke 15,

¹ Timothy Keller: *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, Hodder & Stoughton, London, 2010, pp67-69. Keller rightly uses the word ‘prodigal’ in its proper sense; namely, ‘generous, lavish, unstinting’ when referring to the father in the parable, and ‘wasteful, extravagant, irresponsible’ when speaking of the younger son.

² ‘For three years’ Keller taught with Clowney. Keller went on: ‘During that time I shared with him how I had built upon his foundation and what I believed were the radical implications of this parable of Jesus. He was highly affirmative of the material, which is now in this book’ (Keller: *The Prodigal God* xiii, p136). I will have more to say on Clowney’s sermon.

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calling it *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*.

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In my experience, many believers – not least, preachers – miss the point of Luke 15; that is, they see the central character to be the younger son, who, having wasted his life (and his inheritance) on prostitutes and the like, having been reduced to subsistence in a pigsty, comes to his senses, returns home, and receives a rapturous welcome. Every detail is made to teach some aspect of gospel truth, often with great ingenuity. Indeed, I once heard a sermon by an illustrious Reformed Baptist who lectured a bewildered – but, no doubt, impressed – congregation on the Marrow Controversy in what he supposed to be preaching on the Prodigal Son.³

Christ's point in Luke 15, of course, is put beyond doubt in its opening verses:

Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to [Christ to] hear him. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying: 'This man receives sinners and eats with them'. So he told them this parable...

And 'the parable' – and I think it is but one parable, not three (or four) – consists of several parts: the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, and – and this is the point – the elder brother. I agree with Keller, therefore, when he says: 'The real audience for this story is the Pharisees, the elder brothers'.⁴

Yes, Luke 15 does wonderfully illustrate Christ's statement that he 'came to seek and to save the lost' (Luke 19:10), and, as long as the incidentals are not over-spiritualised (as, alas,

³ The Marrow Controversy erupted with Thomas Boston in Scotland in the 18th century. One of the issues was the free offer of the gospel to sinners. See my *Offer*. The law also came into it. See my *Christ*.

⁴ Keller: *The Prodigal God* p28.

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they nearly always are),⁵ the gospel can be powerfully preached from the chapter.

But this is not its main point; it was not Christ's purpose in telling the parable.

As Luke records, it was because 'the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled' at the Lord for the way he so warmly welcomed and associated with 'sinners' that Christ told the parable. The Pharisees could not abide his open love for sinners – those worse-than-nobodies, lowest-of-the-low, in the eyes of the religious bigots of the day; that is why he directed this 'pretty story' against the bigots – *the punch line being, of course, the elder brother and his refusal to join in the welcome offered to the returning prodigal.* And they did not fail to get the point. Nor did they like it. Hence my rhetorical question to open my discourse on another parable: 'Why would you crucify a man for telling pretty stories?'⁶

For, whatever else it is, Luke 15 is not a pretty story – though the likes of countless schoolteachers and inspectors who are responsible for religious assemblies⁷ (Gervase Phinn springs to mind)⁸ like to think it is. Rather, it stands as a scathing rebuke of those who cannot or will not fully endorse Christ's love for and welcome of sinners, even the worst of them. Clowney had not missed the point and, as a result, he drew an excellent contemporary application. The thrust of Clowney's discourse was that we – as believers – should not play the part of the elder brother (the Pharisees), but heartily endorse God the Father's love for sinners and his welcome of them, and that we should do all we can to see many

⁵ I agree with Keller when he says: 'This story is a great metaphor of sin and salvation, but we can't press every single detail literally' (Keller: *The Prodigal God* p76).

⁶ The parable of the garments and the wineskins (Luke 5:36-38).

⁷ By UK law, schools must hold religious assemblies.

⁸ See Phinn's very popular books on his experiences as a school inspector.

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sinner – whether younger or elder brother – brought into the great gospel feast (Luke 14), converted to Christ.

Alas, many, in my experience, miss the point, concentrating on the wastrel, younger son.

Timothy Keller does not:

Most readings of this parable have concentrated on the flight and return of the younger brother – the ‘Prodigal Son’. That misses the real message of the story, however.⁹

I agree.

But, although Keller does not make the usual mistake, he, too, ‘misses the real message of the story’. Worse, he foists a ‘message’ on Luke 15, a ‘message’ which distorts the gospel; not least, distorts the preaching of the gospel. While Keller is excellent in pointing out that the morally upright are as sinful as the most profligate libertine, alas, in dealing with them he skews the gospel.

A serious claim, you might think. And so it is. The slightest distortion of the gospel carries the weightiest of consequences.

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Keller leaves us in no doubt about the magnitude of what we are talking about, setting the tone right from the start of his *The Prodigal God* by saying that ‘this short book is meant to lay out the essentials of the Christian message, the gospel’. In any case, his subtitle had already made this explicit: *Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*. Moreover, do not miss the ‘recovering’. Keller maintains that he has ‘recovered the heart of the gospel’. It must, therefore, have been lost until his book saw the light of day. In itself, this is a remarkable claim.

He goes on:

⁹ Keller: *The Prodigal God* p7.

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I am turning to this familiar story [that is, what is commonly known as ‘The Parable of the Prodigal Son’]... in order to get to the heart of the Christian faith.¹⁰

Clearly we are dealing with something which is far from trivial.

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Before we go any further and plunge into the details, it will be as well to remind ourselves of some basic facts. The history of the interpretation of parables is fraught. I, as one among many, am convinced that a parable has one main lesson, and that the spiritualising of incidentals needs extreme caution. Luke 15 has probably suffered more than most through a lack of proper reticence in this regard, though the parable of the good Samaritan might run it a close second. On that parable, John Gill, in typical fashion, was not niggardly when it came to suggestions for ‘the meaning’ of ‘the two pence’. Since I do not accept this approach to the parable, I leave you to take your pick – if any of them do appeal to you. Ridiculous, is my comment on all of them.¹¹

Furthermore, I am convinced that no doctrine or practice should be based on a parable; rather, such a basis must be

¹⁰ Keller: *The Prodigal God* xi, xii.

¹¹ John Gill (in his *Commentary*) on ‘the two pence’: ‘The two testaments, Old and New, may be designed, since they are both inspired by God, and dictated by the same Spirit, and bear the same impress, and are alike, and exactly agree, as two pence do, and are given to the ministers of the gospel to handle, and make use of for the good of souls’. If that doesn’t appeal, try this: ‘...unless the two ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s supper should rather be thought to be intended, these bear the same stamp and authority, and are both jointly necessary to communion, and church order, and are given by Christ to his ministers, to be administered by them, for the good of his church’. If not that, how about this: ‘...or rather, the gifts and graces of the Spirit of God, to qualify men for the work of the ministry’? This must not be construed as an appeal for further suggestions!

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sought in the plain passages of the apostolic letters. Christ told us so. As he said to his disciples:

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (John 14:25-26).

And:

I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:12-15).

I agree with those who take these words as the warrant for seeking the definitive word on any doctrine or practice in the apostolic letters.

This being so, we should, right at the start, be cautious – to say the least – about Keller’s claim to be uncovering ‘the essentials and the heart of the gospel’ in a parable, and thus to have ‘explained the true meaning of it’, having ‘discovered the secret heart of Christianity’,¹² and so to ‘unlock the parable’s basic meaning’,¹³ – which meaning many have failed to grasp until now (that is, until Keller brought it to light).

Keller has not done with making massive claims for his view. Take this: in Luke 15 – a parable (I remind you) – he asserts:

...Jesus is redefining everything we thought we knew about connecting to God. He is redefining sin, what it means to be lost, and what it means to be saved... With this parable, Jesus gives us a much deeper concept of ‘sin’ than any of

¹² Keller: *The Prodigal God* xiii.

¹³ Keller: *The Prodigal God* xv.

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us would have if he didn't supply it. Here... is Jesus' radical redefinition of what is wrong with us... Jesus' deeper definition of sin.¹⁴

We must not miss the seriousness of what Keller is alleging. In Luke 15, he alleges, 'Jesus is redefining... He is redefining... With this parable, Jesus gives us... Here... is Jesus' radical redefinition...'. *That is, according to Keller.* But this, of course, needs proof – not mere assertion.

Redefining what?

Keller does not hold back. He contends that this parable is the key passage in all Scripture on the matter of sin and salvation: 'Jesus is redefining everything we thought we knew about connecting to God. He is redefining sin, what it means to be lost, and what it means to be saved'.

Wow!

Take the redefinition of sin. Having made his remarkable allegation as he closes one chapter – 'Jesus is redefining everything we thought we knew about connecting to God' – Keller immediately opens his next chapter – 'Redefining Sin' – under the heading 'Two Ways to Find Happiness', by saying that there are:

...two basic ways people try to find happiness and fulfilment... Each is a way of finding personal significance and worth, of addressing the ills of the world, and determining right from wrong.¹⁵

Thus the principal part of that new definition of sin – according to Keller – is to do with the sinner's mistaken sense of his happiness and self-worth, his identity; in

¹⁴ Keller: *The Prodigal God* pp28,37,43,49. Actually, as I will show, it is Keller himself who redefines sin.

¹⁵ Keller: *The Prodigal God* p29.

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particular, his sin lies in the fact that he is looking for his identity, his sense of worth, in the wrong place.¹⁶

Salvation, therefore, must be ‘finding personal significance and worth, of addressing the ills of the world, and determining right from wrong’ by looking in the right place.

Phew!

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Let us take stock.

According to Keller, never, before Luke 15, had anybody ever really understood the full doctrine of sin and salvation. And if anybody is serious about knowing how to be lost or saved, Luke 15 is the definitive passage in all Scripture which will tell them.

I say it again: this is a claim of staggering magnitude. Very few would agree with it, I suspect. Count me out, for one! Surely, since Luke 15 is a parable (as I keep saying since it is vital to keep it in mind), it cannot possibly be the fundamental source for the vital doctrines of sin and salvation. It might serve – without doubt, it does serve – as an illustration of certain aspects of either or both, an excellent illustration, but no more. There must be scores of passages – the first eight chapters of the letter to the Romans springs to mind – to which, I think, most people would give the accolade of being the foundational, key or cardinal biblical passage on sin and salvation.

¹⁶ Incidentally, in all Keller’s works I have quoted, I cannot recall him speaking of iniquity or transgression. Why not? How does he fit these biblical words – and, more important, the truth they convey – into his system? We could define the three like this: ‘Sin means missing the mark. Iniquity points to an intentional twisting of a given standard, crookedness, twisting, deviation from the right path. Transgression, is more of a wilful rebellion against the given standard, presumptuous breaking of a command, rebellion’. What place, then, is there in Keller’s system for this range of meaning?

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Indeed, the hermeneutic principles¹⁷ behind Keller's own rejection of the usual view of the parable – which rejection I fully endorse – absolutely rule out his own highly inflated claim.

With all this underlying Keller's book, it is no wonder that we end up with some very serious questions about his deductions, and the use to which he puts the parable. I say 'we', but the truth is, I can only say 'some'. But I am definitely one of those.

And some of his 'uses' are truly remarkable. Take this, which appears in the second paragraph of the introduction:

This volume [Keller's book] is not just for seekers...¹⁸ Many lifelong Christian believers feel they understand the basics of the Christian faith quite well and don't think they need a primer. Nevertheless, one of the signs that you may not grasp the unique radical nature of the gospel is that you are certain that you do... This book... is written to both curious outsiders and established insiders of the faith, both to those Jesus calls 'younger brothers' and those he calls 'elder brothers' in the famous parable of the Prodigal Son.¹⁹

Here we meet the astonishing assertion that unless the reader of Keller's book agrees with his definition of 'the unique radical nature of the gospel' it makes it likely that he does not understand the basics of the Christian faith. No shortage of self-confidence here, and pretty dismissive, it seems to me. Nor is there a glimmer of a hint of modesty in Keller's claim to have 'explained the true meaning of [the parable]'.²⁰

Incidentally, has Keller not shot himself in the foot? With tongue in cheek, I cannot resist pointing out that his argument might encourage some to wonder if his very

¹⁷ That is, principles of biblical interpretation.

¹⁸ A category I do not accept. See my *Seeking*.

¹⁹ Keller: *The Prodigal God* xi-xii.

²⁰ Keller: *The Prodigal God* xiii.

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certainty makes it likely that he does not understand the basics of the Christian faith?

In addition, even before we have settled into our seats and fastened our safety belts, Keller's fundamental interpretation is laid out: the younger brother is the curious outsider and the elder brother is the established believer.²¹ I cannot help breaking in and asking that if the elder brother really is one of 'the established insiders of the faith', how then can he be so useful in Keller's approach to the moral – *but unconverted* – young people he has to deal with in New York?

The major text which leads Keller to his title *The Prodigal God* is 2 Corinthians 5:19:

God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not reckoning unto them their trespasses.

Keller:

Jesus [in the parable] is showing us the God of Great Expenditure, who is nothing if not prodigal towards us, his children. God's reckless grace...²²

There are several points, but I confine my remarks. We have already moved way beyond Luke's statement as to why Christ said what he said – namely, to rebuke the Pharisees. Moreover, the fact that one of the two brothers remains unconverted at the end of the parable torpedoes Keller's ship before it has even left the quay. Keller himself does not fail to spot the difficulty:

Although the sons are both wrong and both loved, the story does not end on the same note for each. Why does Jesus construct his story so that one of them is saved... and one of them is not? (At least, not before the story ends).²³

Keller has his suggestion:

²¹ See the extract just quoted from Keller: *The Prodigal God* xi-xii.

²² Keller: *The Prodigal God* xv.

²³ Keller: *The Prodigal God* p46; see also Keller: *The Prodigal God* pp27-28.

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It may be that Jesus is trying (*sic*) to say that while both forms of the self-salvation project [this, that both brothers are trying to save themselves, remains to be proved – DG] are equally wrong, each one is not equally dangerous.²⁴

Let me say that if I was forced to make a choice, I would say that the self-righteous have tougher and thicker skins than those they despise. But this is beside the point.²⁵ Which is? Make no mistake, Keller would have been much happier if the elder brother had gone into the feast and so, in Keller's terms, had been saved. The fact that he remains outside and is thus unsaved is catastrophic for his thesis. The whole thrust of his case is the salvation of the elder brother: the elder brother was what he was meeting in New York, and Luke 15 was the solution. Except, in the parable, the elder brother would not go in! And, as far as we know, never did go in! If only Christ had concluded the parable with the melting of the elder brother, with his realisation that he did not have to work for his self-worth – as, according to Keller, he had been doing all his life. If only!

But, of course, the reality is the fact that the elder brother remains outside in the cold is the punch line (pun intended) of the parable – which was directed against the Pharisees, deliberately designed to rebuke them, calculated to lay bare the dreadful condition of their hearts. Christ did not 'try' to do that; he did it! And the Pharisees felt it.

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Putting all that to one side – not that it is of little or no importance – I want to concentrate on how all this plays out in the way Keller treats regeneration, that vital aspect of the gospel. That is what my book is about. Hence my chosen subtitle: *A Critique of Timothy Keller on Regeneration*.

²⁴ Keller: *The Prodigal God* p46.

²⁵ However thin- or thick-skinned the unbeliever may be, salvation is a work utterly impossible to man, being nothing less than a sovereign act of God. See below.

I fear that Keller's approach marks a fundamental distortion of the gospel – a shift from how God sees the unregenerate to how the unregenerate see themselves. And this shift comes about because contemporary culture is allowed to change the gospel – not merely how it is preached, but what is preached. I go further. The culture, of course, is not changing the gospel. It is men like Keller who are doing that. Nor is he allowing the culture to do it; he is responsible. And it cannot go unchallenged.²⁶

I am not hunting for gnats. Living, as we do, in a day of massive inclusivism in church life, where believer and unbeliever are lumped together, treated virtually as one and the same,²⁷ we have to make doubly sure that our approach to sinners – especially how and what we preach – leaves no confusion about the distinction between saints and sinners. In particular, clarity on the sinner's innate condition, and the need for and nature of regeneration and conversion is vital. There never has been any place for looseness here; but the need for precision in this area has never been greater. This is the context in which Keller's work is both prominent and popular, and why it is so dangerous. At first glance or first

²⁶ In addition to this book, see my *Relationship; Gadfly; Attracting; Confront; Performance*.

²⁷ See my *Relationship; Gadfly; Attracting; Deceit; Performance*. Keller saw attracting unbelievers to church as the acid test: 'The kind of outsiders Jesus attracted are not attracted to the contemporary churches, even our most avant-garde ones... If the preaching of our ministers and the practice of our church members [original 'parishioners'] do not have the same effect on the people that Jesus had, then we must not be declaring the same message that Jesus did' (Keller: *The Prodigal God* pp15-16). Christ's welcome of sinners, of course, was not welcoming them into *ekklesia* life. Christ welcomed sinners to himself: 'Come to me...' (Matt. 11:8-30), not 'Come to church...'. Moreover, Christ's preaching drove many hearers (who had come for carnal reasons) away (John 6:60-66), many of whom wanted to kill him (Luke. 4:28-29). As always, Christ acted with deliberation, often specifically confronting his hearers with truths which he knew would offend.

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hearing it may sound like the biblical gospel, but we need to probe a little deeper.

Many aspects of Keller's *The Prodigal God* could be taken up – as they have been by others – but I want to concentrate on Keller's view of, and emphasis on, 'identity'. I do so because of the devastating effect his view has upon the cardinal gospel doctrine of regeneration, and, as I will show, the number one essential in personal experience. With so much at stake, therefore, clarity is essential. No matter how greatly Keller is to be commended for his ability, effort and sincerity, any marring of regeneration – however slight it might seem at first glance – must be resisted.

So then, Keller on regeneration. But before we get to that we need to be clear about what Scripture means by regeneration. Indeed, before we look at that we need to understand that regeneration is the great essential, the absolute necessity – both in doctrine and experience.