

Timothy Keller: Human Reason vs. Biblical Authority

"We live in a post-modern world, and postmodernism is about relativism. My truth is your falsehood, and your falsehood is my truth. But there is such a thing as the plain truth." (Barukh Binah)

Barukh Binah captured succinctly one of the pillars of postmodernism, the suspicion of truth. Current culture proclaims the death of objective truth in accord with postmodernism. Thus, no one can refer to an external source for truth nor claim that (s)he possesses it. It does not exist.

Today, truth depends upon the individual, even circumstances, resulting in the relativism of truth. "That's just what you believe" intrudes everyday conversation. What began years ago in higher education now infects everything from public education to politics.

As Barukh Binah said, one person's truth turns into another's untruth. At the risk of oversimplification, the suspicion of truth permeates today's culture.

Sadly, the suspicion of truth pervades the professing Christian Church, too. Uncertainty of Biblical truth used to come exclusively from those outside of the Church. Now, it occurs from those holding positions of leadership in the Church.

Rejection of the authority of the Bible, including its inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility, increases among professing Christians and non-Christians, which yields theological ambiguity and denial of Biblical doctrine. Instead of the Church influencing the culture, the culture influences the Church. Today's professing Christian Church conforms to the culture.

One of those leaders who expresses a suspicion of truth, Dr. Timothy Keller, recently wrote an article, which epitomizes this condition. I first discovered it in the *Redeemer Report* at the web site for the Church he pastors. (1) Later, *The Gospel Coalition* published it at their web site. A review of comments to the posting at *The Gospel Coalition's* site reveals an overwhelming support for his commentary. (2) Few question his commentary; even fewer reject it.

In his article, Tim Keller urges his readers to pursue Blaise Pascal's method for presenting the Christian faith. Pascal said,

"Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true. The cure for this is first to show that religion is not contrary to reason, but worthy of reverence and respect. Next, make it attractive, make good men wish it were true, and then show that it is." (3)

Dr. Keller then explains how to implement Pascal's method.

The Fallacy of Reason

However, in advocating Pascal's method, Tim Keller rejects Biblical authority and spurns the Biblical description of a sinner's true condition. The Bible identifies a sinner as dead in trespasses and sin, completely lacking all spiritual life, any interest in God, and any ability to change his condition. (4)

As an enemy of God, the sinner cannot submit to God nor please him. (5) Further, the Bible says that no one seeks after God (6). In fact, those without Christ do not understand Biblical truth and view it as foolishness. (7)

Consequently, the depraved natures of sinners control every aspect of their lives, minds, and wills. Thus, mankind's sinful bias prevents any inherent capability to evaluate truthfully any rational argument autonomously, especially Biblical argumentation and truth.

Keller rejects this fundamental Biblical truth about humanity's nature and presumes falsely that mankind possesses this ability. This error forms the foundation of Keller's proposal, which contradicts the Bible's declaration of the sinner's true condition.

To build upon the false foundation of a sinner's autonomous reason foolishly builds upon sand. (8)

The Fallacy of Marketing

Further, Tim Keller proposes that those who present the Christian faith to unbelievers rely upon salesmanship techniques. In his article, Keller places significant stress upon making Christianity appealing and attractive to non-Christians.

He suggests that one stress the benefits of the Christian faith and show how Christianity fulfills a person's aspirations. Such methodology, currently popular within the emergent Church and Church growth movements, fits what my late friend and mentor, Dr. James Grier, called "...sell Jesus through marketing with the emphasis upon the benefits of salvation..." (9)

Again, Keller's proposition lacks Biblical authority, which presupposes falsely that someone can sell faith in Christ as someone sells a bar of soap.

Absence of the Holy Spirit

The emphasis of Keller's article relies upon the abilities of the servant of God who describes God's redemption through faith in Christ. In addition to reason and marketing, Tim Keller says that the person's presentation of Christianity must make emotional and cultural sense. He concentrates upon the methodology of the presentation and its humanistic features.

Although God does use human instruments to proclaim the gospel, the instrument does not constitute the essential role in the process. Significantly, Tim Keller does not address the role of the Holy Spirit in the presentation of the Christian faith.

Nowhere in the article does Keller mention the function of the Holy Spirit or suggest the need to rely upon the Spirit in the presentation of the gospel. The message of the gospel meets supernatural resistance from the evil one, who blinds sinners to Biblical truth with supernatural blindness.

This spiritual battle demands supernatural victory by the Holy Spirit over satan's interference. The advocate for the gospel needs the authority and ability of the Spirit to present it. In response to prayer, the Holy Spirit brings His presence and power to aid God's messenger.

Not only does the advocate need the authority and ability of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit alone convicts a sinner of sin. He exclusively opens blinded eyes to understand Biblical truth and its requirement in a person's life. By the unique ministry of the Holy Spirit, an unbeliever receives the new birth, repents of sin, and trusts in Christ solely for salvation. Keller's oversight, at best, or neglect, at worst, illustrates another example of how he obfuscates the authority of the Bible.

Biblical Authority

The presentation of Christ and the defense of Christianity demands the unequivocal acceptance of the inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility of the Bible. These foundational truths must mold the way we call people to faith in Christ. We must believe its revelational truths, especially their statements of the total depravity of mankind and Christ's provision for sinners.

These truths shape not only our understanding of a person's sinful condition. They also form our understanding of the need for divine intervention in the life of a sinner. No human methodology will suffice.

Ezekiel, an Old Testament prophet, provides a vivid picture of implementing these truths. In Ezekiel 37.1-15, he recorded his vision of the valley of dry bones, more aptly dead bones, which pictured the spiritual condition of Israel.

God instructed him to do a humanly foolish thing: call upon the dead bones to hear the word of the Lord. Then, Ezekiel described the divine intervention that they needed to come to life. Finally, the prophet prayed that God would send that divine intervention to the dead bones so that they might have life.

God heard Ezekiel's prayer. God sent life to the lifeless.

In His ministry, Jesus frequently called the spiritually dead to life. At the start of his ministry, Jesus called to the masses, "Repent and believe in the gospel." (10) In John 3, He told Nicodemous that he needed a new birth from above. Then, Christ explained the need of the work of the Holy Spirit to give him that new life. To the woman at the well as recorded in John 4, He said she needed living water that only He could give her, if she but asked Him for it.

In His encounters with sinners, Christ recognized their total depravity and the need of supernatural power in their lives. Throughout his ministry, He told people of their need of new life from God, called regeneration. He called them to repent, to turn from their sinfulness and to believe upon Him.

Humanly speaking, none of those whom Christ encountered could take any of the steps that He commanded of them. Yet, God in His sovereign grace by the power of the Holy Spirit intervened in the lives of multitudes and enabled them to repent and believe upon Christ.

Summary

Today, God's true children must rely upon Biblical authority in their presentations of the gospel of Christ. They must reject the popular methodologies recommended by popular leaders like Timothy Keller. The sinfulness of sinners prevents their response to mere humanistic attempts of reason and marketing of benefits. Sinners stand separated from God by their sin, spiritually dead, and condemned under God's judgment, the real reason they need Christ. He alone saves sinners and reconciles them to God.

Like Ezekiel and Jesus, we, as Christ followers, must identify the true condition of those to whom we present the gospel. In faith and reliance upon the Holy Spirit, we call them to repent from their sin and to trust Christ.

As we do, we pray for God's divine work in their lives by the Spirit. He alone imparts new life and brings sinners to faith in Christ. Jesus paid the penalty of the sins of people like them and promises to reconcile to God all who come to Him in faith.

Perhaps you, dead in your trespasses and sins, have never learned of your true condition before God. You stand condemned before God under His judgment, and you cannot please Him. You need new life that only He gives by His Holy Spirit.

As Ezekiel and Jesus did centuries ago, I call upon you to repent of your sin and to trust Christ. I pray that He will come to you today and enable you to call upon Jesus, Who will cleanse you from sin and change your life.

References

1. You can read the article by Dr. Keller, "Pascal's Method For Presenting The Christian Faith," at this link: http://www.redeemer.com/news_and_events/newsletter/?aid=507
2. Web site for *The Gospel Coalition*: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2014/02/26/pascals-method-for-presenting-the-christian-faith/?comments#comments>
3. As quoted in "Pascal's Method For Presenting The Christian Faith," *Redeemer Report*, January 2014.
4. Ephesians 2.1-3
5. Romans 8.7-8
6. Romans 3.9-18
7. 1 Corinthians 2.14
8. Bahnsen, Greg L., edited by Joel McDurmon. *Presuppositional Apologetics*. American Vision Press, Powder Springs, GA and Covenant Media Press, Nacogdoches, TX. 2008. p. 268.
9. Grier, James M. "The Emergent Church: Responding to Postmodernity". Seminar at Heritage Seminary. 2006.
9. John 3.3
10. Mark 1.14
11. Thank you to Dr. Ron Mansdoerfer and Dr. William Brown who assisted in the review of this article.