

## *Keller on Identity*

Here we reach the crux of my argument with Keller.

I intend no patronisation whatever when I say that I applaud men such as Keller who have the ability to get to grips with contemporary culture so that they can understand the way in which sinners – especially the young – are thinking today, and what they hope to achieve. In particular, Keller not only wants to know what makes young people tick, he wants to use that knowledge to communicate with them, to reach them with the gospel, and see them converted to Christ.

Even so, my serious disagreement with him remains. Why?

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Keller defines regeneration thus:

I'm going to suggest... that what it means to be born again at least means new sensibility and new identity. That's what the new birth does, it gives you a new sensibility and identity.<sup>1</sup>

I will say nothing at this stage about Keller's view of 'sensibility'.<sup>2</sup> Not that it is unimportant, but first and foremost it is Keller's view of 'identity' which concerns me.

Yes, Keller is right. When God regenerates a sinner he does give him a new identity. But what are we talking about – precisely – when we speak of 'a new identity'? I have set out what I see as the scriptural answer. What is Keller's?

Keller uses contemporary culture's own view of 'identity' to communicate with his hearers. But, alas, at the most crucial stage when addressing sinners with the gospel – the need for

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Keller: 'You Must Be Born Again' 3rd April 2019, Gospel Coalition website.

<sup>2</sup> I will return to it in the chapter 'Keller Preaching Regeneration'.

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regeneration – he continues to use that culture’s concept of identity-seeking.<sup>3</sup>

I am not splitting hairs. I am making a very serious criticism. Let me explore it.

What does Keller mean – precisely, exactly – by ‘identity’? How does he use it when addressing sinners with the gospel? No misunderstanding can be allowed to creep in here. Go wrong here, and all is wrong. Words are important, but perception is even more so; that is, any misunderstanding on the part of the hearer – we are, in particular, thinking about the unbeliever, the unregenerate – can be lethal; consequently, the preacher (or writer) must take all necessary steps to prevent it. In this regard, negatives are vital. Clearly, we are talking about the care the preacher needs to take in his discourses, or an author in his writings on the gospel – he is responsible, accountable. This care lies right at the heart of the preacher’s task because God, to whom he has to answer, has most definitely laid this responsibility upon him.<sup>4</sup>

For Keller, ‘identity’ means ‘your self-worth and happiness’:

Whatever we worship we will serve, for worship and service are always inextricably bound together. We are ‘covenantal’ beings. We enter into covenant service with whatever most captures our imagination and heart. It ensnares us. So every human personality, community, thought form, and culture will be based on some ultimate concern or some ultimate allegiance – either to God or to some God-substitute. Individually, we will ultimately look either to God or to success, romance, family, status, popularity, beauty, or something else *to make us feel*

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Tim Keller on How to Bring the Gospel to Post-Christian America’ 11th May 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Keller, of course, understands this: ‘Let me be careful to avoid a misunderstanding here’ (Keller: *The Prodigal God* p76). He was referring to not spiritualising ‘every single detail literally’ of the parable in Luke 15, but it must apply to every aspect of preaching and writing.

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*personally significant and secure, and to guide our choices... I define sin as building your identity – your self-worth and happiness – on anything other than God.*<sup>5</sup>

This must be taken fully on-board. Our ‘identity’ is that which makes ‘us feel personally significant and secure, and guide[s] our choices’; it is our ‘self-worth and happiness’. When actually preaching on regeneration, he tells his hearers: ‘Your identity is a sense of self and a sense of worth’.<sup>6</sup>

Very closely related to this, Keller has his own (re)definition of sin, intimately connected with identity: ‘I define sin as building your identity – your self-worth and happiness – on anything other than God’.

From these two key building blocks, Keller erects his system.

There are, he says, ‘two basic ways people try to find happiness and fulfilment’, ‘relating to God, and dealing with our problems’.<sup>7</sup> This inevitably means that ‘salvation’ – a sinner actually being saved, converted, that is – is to get a

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<sup>5</sup> Timothy Keller: ‘How to Talk About Sin in a Post-Modern Age’, 12th May 2017, emphasis mine.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Keller: ‘You Must Be Born Again’ 3rd April 2019, Gospel Coalition website. I have noted Keller’s debt to a sermon by Edmund P. Clowney on Luke 15, and Keller’s claim that Clowney strongly supported the material he eventually published in his *The Prodigal God*. Of course, I am not able to comment on Clowney’s later affirmation of Keller’s position, but I heard nothing in that sermon – ‘Sharing the Father’s Welcome’ – that supports Keller’s stance on the vital matter we are considering. I have already noted the thrust of Clowney’s discourse; namely, that we – as believers – should heartily endorse God’s love for sinners and his welcome of them, and that we should do all we can to see many sinners – whether younger-brother types or elder-brother – come into the great gospel feast (Luke 14). Quite! But on the matter of regeneration being a new sense of self-worth – Keller’s view – not, as far as I can detect, a whisper.

<sup>7</sup> Keller: *The Prodigal God* pp29,71.

proper sense of ‘self-worth’, ‘happiness and fulfilment’. Hence, referring to Luke 15, the two brothers were attempting to be saved by doing what ‘they believed would make them happy and fulfilled’.<sup>8</sup> Those typified by the younger brother think that ‘self-discovery’ is being ‘free to pursue their own goals and fulfilment of their talents and potentialities’<sup>9</sup> regardless of custom and convention; this is what would make them happy, and it is thinking and acting on that principle that constitutes their sin. Those typified by the elder brother think that ‘the way of moral conformity’ is the right and only way – ‘we only attain happiness and a world made right by rectitude’ – and it is thinking and acting on that principle that constitutes their sin.<sup>10</sup> Though there may be ‘variations, these are still [the] only two primary approaches to living. The message of Jesus’ parable is that both of these approaches are wrong [that is, not only mistaken, but sinful]’.<sup>11</sup> And the sin lies in thinking and acting as though pursuing these ends leads to self-worth and happiness.

We need to be clear. According to Keller, *it is not the seeking of self-interest that is sinful, but the seeking of it in the wrong way*. As Keller puts it:

I define sin as building *your identity – your self-worth and happiness* – on anything other than God.<sup>12</sup>

And this is where regeneration comes into the frame. Keller on regeneration:

It is only when you see the desire to be your own Saviour and Lord – lying beneath both your sins and your moral goodness – that you are on the verge of understanding the gospel and becoming a Christian indeed. When you realise

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<sup>8</sup> Keller: *The Prodigal God* p39.

<sup>9</sup> Original ‘self-actualisation’.

<sup>10</sup> Keller: *The Prodigal God* pp29-30.

<sup>11</sup> Keller: *The Prodigal God* p33.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Keller: ‘How to Talk About Sin in a Post-Modern Age’, emphasis mine.

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that the antidote to being bad is not just being good, you are on the brink. If you follow through, it will change everything: how you relate to God, self, others, the world, your work, your sins, your virtue. It's called the new birth because it's so radical.<sup>13</sup>

Once we are regenerate:

We realise that the love, the greatness, the consolation and the honour we have been seeking in other things are<sup>14</sup> here [in the death of Christ].<sup>15</sup>

Having got this far, it surely must be obvious that we are dealing with matters of the utmost importance. The fact is, Keller's deductions from Luke 15 must play a vital role in preaching the gospel. As he himself said, he wrote his *The Prodigal God* 'to lay out the essentials of the Christian message, the gospel' – 'the essentials of the gospel', I stress. Very well. From John 3:3-8, we know that regeneration is essential in two respects: it is an essential doctrine of the gospel, and it is an essential experience for every human being. Moreover, we know from other sources how Keller uses his deductions from Luke 15 in approaching unbelievers with the gospel, and, in particular, how they play into his view of regeneration. So what could be of greater importance than this?

Keller does not hide his system under any bushel.<sup>16</sup> So important is the following extract, I give it at length. Please bear in mind that I have taken it from a transcript of a conversation with Carey Nieuwhof, and this accounts for the style. But I am sure Keller's case – 'How to Bring the Gospel to Post-Christian America' – comes over clear enough:

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<sup>13</sup> Keller: *The Prodigal God* p78.

<sup>14</sup> Original 'is'.

<sup>15</sup> Keller: *The Prodigal God* p88.

<sup>16</sup> An oblique reference to Matt. 5:15; Mark 4:21; Luke 11:33 in the AV (KJV).

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[Keller:] Christianity... it's all about identity now. Christianity is the only identity that is received, not achieved. If you say: 'I can create myself', that's a lot of pressure, and you can see it online... Christianity is the one identity that's received, or the fact is that because of what Jesus Christ did, Jesus Christ [has shown that he] is actually a person who lost his glory, and his power, and his privilege, and came, and died on the cross for us, paid the penalty for our inhumanity to God, and to each other. [In] other words, he took the penalty, and because of that, when I believe in him, I can actually know that God loves me unconditionally, forever...

With my young people that I came to here in New York, [I pitched it wrong in that] basically... I assumed their cultural narrative, and showed how only in Christ, you might say... their storyline [could] have a happy ending... Today... now, [however, I have learned that] the emphasis is not psychological and sociological... it's all about creating your own self. If I say I'm this, that's who I am, I can do that... [So] if I was starting a church now... [I] would... say [that is, I would tell them]... Christianity gives you the only identity that is... because it's all about identity now. Christianity is the only identity that is received, not achieved... Now, what that means is... all postmodern people say that identity is something you have to work at<sup>17</sup>... They say identity, it's a role that you play. That's horrible pressure. I said we've got an identity that's received, not achieved, that it's not up and down depending on how well I perform... Now, what's beautiful about that is the Christian identity says you're a sinner, and you would go to hell if it wasn't for Jesus Christ, so it's got the lowest, it makes you come all the way down here and say: 'I can't save myself'. So, you give a low position, you're a sinner, you deserve nothing but judgment, and yet in Christ, I am loved more than I dared hope. I'm accepted. Jesus Christ says: 'The Father loves you even as he loves me'... What's brilliant about the Christian identity is it doesn't exclude people, and actually, it's an enormous equaliser, and it takes all the pressure off. Now, that's where I would be going, I would be saying: 'I don't care how you guys are forming your identity, there is no identity like the one that

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<sup>17</sup> Original 'identity is performative'.

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you can find in Jesus Christ'... You've got to connect the gospel with... the cultural narrative.

Carey Nieuwhof [the man conducting the interview]: So, just exegeting the culture?

Tim Keller: Yeah, right, but then you've actually got to find a way to take the plot line of the culture, and give it a happy ending in Jesus. For example, 1 Corinthians 1... What is Paul doing? He says, the cultural narrative of the Jews is we're pragmatic, we want to know how you get things done; give me power. The cultural narrative of the Greeks was, they're [that is, we're] the artists, we want contemplation, we want wisdom, we want beauty, and what he's saying is the gospel confronts the idolatries of both of those cultures differently, but also, fulfils them differently. The cross confronts the idolatry of power and of wisdom, but then it says, but the cross is the true wisdom, the true power of God... In the cross you actually get... [the] culture... you want.<sup>18</sup>

Do not miss it! Preaching the gospel is 'just exegeting the culture?' 'Yeah, right, but then you've actually got to find a way to take the plot line of the culture, and give it a happy ending in Jesus'. This is Keller's strategy in addressing the unconverted.

In other words, the unregenerate are seeking their sense of self-worth in some experience, job, possession, whatever. Keller, latching on to that desire, tries to make sure that his hearers know they will never get that self-worth by pursuing such ends. But if they are prepared to receive the sense of self-esteem or happiness that is offered them in Jesus, they will get it.

That, for Keller, is what regeneration and conversion are all about.

Tragic!

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<sup>18</sup> '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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So much for the theory. How does it work out in practice – when Keller actually preaches on regeneration?