

Scripture and the Church

Tim Keller's False Gospel: Changing Both the Method and the Message

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Part three of a series. Read [part two](#).

Timothy Keller's conception of the "gospel" and method of presenting it are both built on a faulty foundation: the misconception that man changes, therefore the message must change.

In previous articles in this series, we have seen the problematic nature of Timothy Keller's theological background and ecumenical associations. We have also seen that Keller, when asked questions that required a clear presentation of the one true Gospel, evaded, equivocated, and misrepresented God's truth.

Keller frequently emphasizes what he calls the need for a "gospel movement" – a phrase used repeatedly on his websites and in public discussion. But what kind of a "gospel" is it, and what kind of a "movement" does he envision to convey it?

Keller's discussions of his "gospel" often incorporate the language of Scripture and of orthodoxy. But Scripture is not at the center of Keller's false conception of "gospel" – nor is God. And as we shall see, Keller has a very strange conception of God, especially for a man who was supposedly trained in Reformed theology and is a leading minister in a purportedly Reformed denomination.

What, then, is at the center of Keller's conception of "gospel"? Man is – unregenerate man. The presentation of the "gospel" must be, to quote Keller, "in line with the [unregenerate] culture's own (best) aspirations, hopes, and convictions."

Let me direct your attention to Keller's essay, from which the foregoing quotation is taken, titled [*Deconstructing Defeater Beliefs: Leading the Secular to Christ*](#). Until recently (mid-2011) this essay appeared on the websites of Redeemer Presbyterian

Church, but seems to have been recently removed. It is still widely available on many websites that promote Keller's conceptions and methods. In this essay Keller sets forth his definition of the "gospel" and methodology for presenting it. All of the remaining Keller quotations in this article are from that essay. Keller and others like him claim that they are not changing the message of the Gospel, only the method of presenting it. But we will find that he is in fact changing both.

Man Changes, So The Message Must Change?

The foundation of Keller's false conception of a "gospel" is that man changes, and therefore the message must change as man changes in terms of his culture.

Keller begins by asserting that man's resistance to the Gospel is inherently cultural: "Every culture hostile to Christianity holds to a set of 'common-sense' consensus beliefs that automatically make Christianity seem implausible to people. These are what philosophers call "defeater beliefs"....Christianity is disbelieved in one culture for totally opposite reasons it is disbelieved in another."

Keller has immediately begun to erect an un-Biblical foundation for the Gospel and its presentation. There has never been a culture that has *not* been hostile to Christianity – and by this I mean not nominal Christianity, but true Biblical Christianity: regeneration of the spiritually dead by the Holy Spirit, so that they may repent of their sins and place their faith in the Christ who propitiated the wrath of God for their sins with His own blood on the cross.

Man's True Problem

Man's problem is not cultural, as Keller asserts. Man's problem is sin. Man's problem is his total depravity. Man's problem is unbelief. All cultures since the Fall are depraved cultures inherently at war with God. Man's problem is that his heart is blinded by Satan, the god of this world (2 Corinthians 4:4). Man is spiritually, dead, and he must

be regenerated by the Holy Spirit (Ephesians chapter two). That is the message of Romans chapters one through three, and First Corinthians chapters one and two:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. (Romans 1:18-19)

For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none who understands; there is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside; they have together become unprofitable; there is none who does good, no, not one." "Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit"; "The poison of asps is under their lips"; "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness." "Their feet are swift to shed blood; destruction and misery are in their ways; and the way of peace they have not known." "There is no fear of God before their eyes." Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. (Romans 3:9-19)

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Corinthians 1:18)

These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. (1 Corinthians 2:13-14)

"Trying Christianity On"?

Keller's way of thinking runs counter to these clear statements of Scripture. Keller asserts that we must deal with man's cultural problem by understanding that "post-modern people come to Christ through process [we shall say more subsequently about what he means by this term], through relationships, through mini-decisions, through 'trying Christianity on'. They are pragmatic rather than abstract in their reasoning, etc." But, says Keller, this does not mean that they should be approached with "virtually no arguments at all."

There have been many times in New York City that I have seen people make professions of faith that seemed quite heart-felt, but when faced with serious consequences if they maintained their identification with Christ (e.g. missing the opportunity for a new sexual partner or some major professional setback) they bailed on their Christian commitment. The probable reason was that they had not undergone deeper 'world-view change'. They had fitted Christ to their individualistic world-view rather than fitting their worldview to Christ. They professed faith simply because Christianity *worked* for them, and not because they grasped it as true whether it is 'working' for them this year or not! They had not experienced a 'power encounter' between the gospel and their individualistic world-view.

Let us stop here once again. The problems Keller observes are the precisely the problems that come through the approach to the "gospel" of which Keller approves – "com[ing] to Christ through process, through relationships, through mini-decisions, through 'trying Christianity on'." Jesus Himself spoke of this with a clarity that Keller does not:

Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places,

where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear! (Matthew 13:3-9)

Therefore hear the parable of the sower: When anyone hears the Word of the kingdom, and does not understand it, then the wicked one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who received seed by the wayside. But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the Word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the Word, immediately he stumbles. Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the Word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the Word, and he becomes unfruitful. But he who received seed on the good ground is he who hears the Word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and produces: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. (Matthew 13:18-23)

What is Jesus' message in these passages? The problem is the heart of man, a heart that must be changed. The problem is not cultural. Man cannot "have a change of heart" on his own, or through mere engagement with God on a cultural level. God must change man's heart. In this, the tribesman of the Amazon is no different from the most-degreed university professor.

Neither proclaiming nor receiving the true Gospel is a matter of, as Keller puts it, sinful man "trying Christianity on" to see if it suits him, like the latest pair of fashion jeans. Unless man's heart is changed, he will quickly find that he doesn't like the garment! Entirely different from this is the person who is truly saved, who, as Jesus

said, "hears the Word and understands it" – not by his own reason, not by cultural contextualization, but by the regenerating and illuminating work of the Spirit.

The Gospel Must Be In Line With Man's Best Aspirations?

But Keller suppresses these truths and presses on with the message of cultural engagement. He says that we must

connect the story of Jesus to the base-line cultural narratives [emphasis his]. In short, you have to show in line with the culture's own (best) aspirations, hopes, and convictions that its own cultural story won't be resolved or have "a happy ending" outside of Christ. . . .

First, the gospel must be presented briefly but so vividly and attractively (and so hooked into the culture's base-line cultural narratives) that the listener is virtually compelled to say "*It would be wonderful if that were true...*"

Jesus must be the answer to the questions the culture is asking. Don't forget – every gospel presentation presents Jesus as the answer to *some* set of human-cultural questions [emphasis is Keller's]...

In other words, Keller is saying that our presentation must be man-centered: We must show that "the story of Jesus" is "in line with" sinful man's highest "aspirations, hopes, and convictions." And so, as those "aspirations, hopes, and convictions" change, the message must change. Is this the picture we find in the opening chapters of Romans and First Corinthians? Not at all.

What we find in Scripture is God's declaration that man is a fallen and condemned race whose unstable thinking and aspirations, even at their highest, are not "in line with" the true Gospel message in any way, shape, or form. We find man who "does not receive [accept as true] the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know [begin to learn] them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14).

Furthermore, will any culture of this present depraved world system have, as Keller puts it, a "happy ending"? No. First John 2:17 tells us that this world is passing away, with all of its cravings and longings, "but he who does the will of God abides forever" in the world to come.

A Denial of Total Depravity

Keller's insistence that the "gospel" must be "in line with" sinful man's highest "aspirations, hopes, and convictions" is, in fact, a stark denial of man's total depravity. It is the kind of thinking that leads to a view of salvation as a cooperative work between man and God. In historical -theological terms this is known as semi-Pelagianism, and it is the cardinal error of true Arminianism and also (despite its denials) of Roman Catholicism – that God helps those who help themselves into the kingdom.

From this faulty beginning, Keller goes on to teach the use of a "gospel" presentation designed to be attractive to the mind and heart of unregenerated man – a "gospel" stripped of its essentials, and robbed of Divine power and authority. One of the most telling things about Keller's proposed "gospel" presentation is this: in nearly 5,000 words we find not a single word of Scripture, but rather a great deal of human philosophy and wisdom. We shall see more of this as we continue, the Lord willing.

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