

## Keller on 'Rebranding' the Doctrine of Sin

*Robert McCullom*

### Introduction

On the *Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals* blog, Reformation 21, Rick Phillips wrote: 'Our poor friend Tim Keller suffers the fate of having his every word parsed over a thousand times, which is the inevitable result of the vast influence his every word exerts over the Neo-Evangelical, Young, Restless, and Reformed.' There is always the danger that interaction with popular and influential figures like Tim Keller will indeed lead to minute and over-zealous scrutiny of his words rather than thoughtful engagement with his meaning. Yet words are the stock-in-trade of theologians and preachers, and by using them we invite analysis of them. When it comes to the gospel, our word choices are of supreme importance, and must correspond with the final Word of Scripture. If they do not, then we shall certainly mislead people.

Any presentation of the gospel has to deal with the problem of sin. If the gospel is the solution to anything, it is the solution to this particular problem. Keller recognizes this: his attempts to engage with modern culture in his presentation of the gospel wrestle with the issue of sin, and his influence invites careful analysis of his presentation. While we wish to avoid undue 'parsing' of Keller's vocabulary as we examine his doctrine of sin, we will attempt to evaluate his teaching by seeking to let him speak for himself.

Keller has not only come to the attention of the 'young, restless and reformed' constituency; he has also been noticed by the secular media. An article on the USA Today website which describes Keller as 'a modern-day variation of the circuit-riding preacher', quotes him as saying that the concept of sin is vital to evangelical preaching, but that his audience requires a rebranding of the concept:

'They do get the idea of branding, of taking a word or term and filling it with your own content, so I have to rebrand the word "sin";' Keller says. 'Around here it means self-centeredness, the acorn from which it all grows. Individually, that means "I live for myself, for my own glory and happiness, and I'll work for your happiness if it helps me." Communally, self-centeredness is destroying peace and justice in the world, tearing the net of interwovenness, the fabric of humanity.'

In one of his most recent works, *Center Church*, Keller gives explicit pragmatic justification for his approach. He says:

When I first began ministry in Manhattan, I encountered a cultural allergy to the Christian concept of sin. I found that I got the most traction with people, however, when I turned to the Bible's extensive teaching on idolatry. Sin, I explained, is building your life's meaning on any thing — even a very good thing — more than on God. Whatever else we build our life on will drive our passions and choices and end up enslaving us.

Keller also suggests that simply to define sin as a violation of God's law is problematic in a postmodern culture and raises 'philosophical issues' which arise out of any attempt to begin our evangelistic engagement with the current generation with reference to the moral code of an ancient Israelite society. Hence the need to rebrand.

The idea of 'rebranding' a biblical doctrine such as sin is an interesting proposition. To do this successfully would mean that the presentation is altered but the content remains the same. Is Keller's attempt to 'rebrand' sin a success? The only way to decide is to see how he describes the human condition in his published works and to assess his doctrinal position in the light of Scripture.

### Sin as Identity

One of Keller's first books was *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, a popular apologetic for evangelical belief, aimed at both skeptics and believers. In his introduction, Keller gives some personal information as a backdrop to the writing of this book. He highlights some of the barriers which appeared during his college years both as challenges to his faith and as defining trajectories for his later thinking. First there was an intellectual barrier, in which difficult questions arose in Keller's thinking to which Christianity gradually appeared the only feasible solution. Second, there was a personal barrier, which was overcome by experience and the living out of the faith he had embraced. Third, there was a social barrier, in which he came to appreciate the importance of community and, therefore, the church.

For Keller, the culture into which we communicate the gospel has become a divided one, with growth in religious faith paralleling growth in skepticism. For Keller this is no bad thing; there are difficult questions with which believers need to wrestle, as there are faith positions with which skeptics need to grapple. In the light of this, Keller's book looks first at the difficult questions which the gospel cannot ignore: questions of theodicy (vindication of divine providence in view of the existence of evil), science and the interpretation of Scripture.

In the second part of the book, Keller examines the key components of biblical faith: the existence of God, the nature of religion, the cross and resurrection of Christ. It is in this second section that Keller deals specifically (in chapter 10) with 'The Problem of Sin'.

Notwithstanding the fact that any talk of sin is 'offensive or ludicrous to many', Keller's starting point is that everybody recognizes that something is wrong in the world. Although Christianity defines that problem as the problem of sin, it is false to think, argues Keller, that this is bare pessimism. Quite the opposite: 'The Christian doctrine of sin, properly understood, can be a great resource for human hope.' Keller's starting-point, as he expounds that doctrine, is from the Danish philosopher Kierkegaard, from whom Keller concludes that 'sin is the despairing refusal to find your deepest identity in your relationship and service to God. Sin is seeking to become oneself, to get an identity, apart from him.'

Keller wants to move his readers away from the idea that sin can be defined merely in terms of breaking divine rules; that is, in breaking the commandments of God. He instead defines sin as that which replaces God in giving a person his or her identity. Sin is 'not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into ultimate things'. Illustrating this from popular

culture, Keller goes on to highlight the consequences of these forms of self-identity. When we identify ourselves in the light of our status, achievements, relationships, or other God-substitutes, Keller argues that we destroy ourselves. We open the door to fear, with the paralysis fear brings. We give way to bitterness, insecurity, addiction and emptiness. By refusing to build our lives on a relationship to God, we build for ourselves castles of disillusionment and despair.

Sin, however, affects us socially, not merely personally. By identifying ourselves with race or status or ethnicity we invariably develop enmity and hostility towards other expressions of race, status and ethnicity. We destroy the social fabric, since:

the real culture war is taking place inside our own disordered hearts, wracked by inordinate desires for things that control us, that lead us to feel superior, and exclude those without them, and that fail to satisfy us even when we get them.

Sin, therefore, has cosmic consequences too, as the original peace, wholeness and joyful life purposed by God for the universe is lost by man's inability and unwillingness to find his pleasure and his purpose in God. Thus, only the rebuilding of a relationship with God through Jesus Christ can deal with this problem.

All of this seems fresh, relevant and connected with popular culture. Keller has a remarkable way of weaving insights from philosophy, history, and even film and television into his efforts to contextualize and contemporize the gospel story. Ironically, however, his greatest weakness is his failure to ground his insights in the biblical narrative itself. This is major defect because it means his conclusions lack the authority which Scripture alone can provide.

Interestingly, while Keller's discussion of the problem of sin in *The Reason for God* draws from sources as diverse as H.G. Wells and the *Rocky* movie, his chapter on the problem of sin contains some ten pages of text before the Bible is even mentioned. The definition of sin excludes any discussion of biblical teaching, and the personal and social consequences of sin are explored without reference to biblical teaching. Only when he comes to deal with the cosmic dimension and consequence of sin does Keller refer to passages in Genesis and Romans.

Perhaps Keller has a rationale for this form of apologetic, since he is laboring to address both a world of questioners and doubters and a world of new Christians who come to orthodoxy with more questions than answers — what Keller calls his 'spiritual third way' of presenting the Christian faith. Yet by his own admission, 'An authoritative Bible is not the enemy of a personal relationship with God. It is the precondition for it.'

If this statement affirming the absolute necessity of Scripture to inform our relationship with God is true, as it undoubtedly is, what is very strange is that the Bible is not called as an authority on the nature of sin as the fundamental problem of the world. If it had been, then perhaps Keller would not have been so quick to dismiss a definition of sin as a breaking of God's rules. For that is the Bible's own definition. The standard, for example, by which it could be ascertained that one had sinned — and therefore required some kind of atonement — was that the law had been broken: 'If anyone sins, doing any of the things that by the Lord's commandments ought not to be done....' says Leviticus 5:17. Similarly, in the New Testament,

James 4:17 says that 'Whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin.' And 'the right thing to do' is that which has been required by the 'one lawgiver and judge' of whom James speaks (in 4:12).

According to 1 John 3:4, 'Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness.' That does not mean that sin can be defined by the absence of law; quite the opposite. It is defined by the disregard of law, by the refusal to submit to law. The Westminster Divines defined sin in the Larger Catechism, Question 24: "Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of any law of God, given as a rule to the reasonable creature." It is the defining characteristic of our fallenness that the mind of man, in his natural, fallen condition, 'does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot' (Rom. 8:7). That is the tragedy of sin.

Keller does not deny this; yet having dismissed defining sin as disobedience, he then absolutizes the prohibition of idolatry in the first commandment and defines sin through the lens of that particular proscription. Subsequently, as we shall see, the identification of sin with idolatry becomes a prominent motif in his other writings.

This definition, however, becomes problematic in its tendency both to subjectivize and to relativize the issue. That is to say, the focus shifts in a subtle manner away from the God against whom the sin is committed, and whose law has been broken, to the way in which men and women have carved out other gods for themselves, and thus created their own sin problem by self-identification through a relationship to someone or something other than the God of the Bible. This is not to deny that there is a subjective element in sin. It is the most subjective problem in the world. Yet the root of this subjectivity lies not in how individual sinners choose their own God-substitutes but in the fact that all sinners oppose a personal God who is their creator and sovereign lawgiver. In the light of this, there is something quite misleading in the presentation of sin as 'a resource for hope'. In Keller's presentation, the hope-ful aspect of the doctrine is that it addresses the real issue, avoiding definitions of sin that focus merely on sociology or psychology. Yet sin is a reason for hope only in the way in which diagnosing the true nature of a fatal disease is a ground for offering the right cure. To know that I have a disease which can kill me is not a resource for hope: rather it is to know that there is a cure for it. Keller would not deny this and his discussion on the cross is replete with the language of 'costly suffering':

There was a debt to be paid - God himself paid it. There was a penalty to be borne - God himself bore it. Forgiveness is always a form of costly suffering.

The language of penalty itself, nevertheless, throws us back onto our definitions of sin. What does it mean for the death of Christ to be *penal* substitution? It means that the law enacts its payment in full. Man, in sin, deserved to pay the penalty for disobeying God's law. The penalty is death; eternal suffering in hell. The apostle Paul, writing to the Galatians and quoting Deuteronomy 27:26 reminded them of the reason why the sinner is under such a curse; "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law and do them." Gal 3:10. The substitute needed to keep the law in every detail. That Christ did as the Substitute. Not only did he keep the law perfectly, so offering up in himself a perfect sacrifice, but he also bore in himself the penalty of a broken law. "... the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all." Isa 53:6. The threat for the disobedience is carried through. The cross did not

overcompensate: it honored the law in every particular, so that the breach of the commandment that is the definition of sin becomes the judicial basis on which the death of Christ becomes an atonement. It is precisely for this reason that Keller's definition of sin as a false identity ultimately fails: by itself, it cannot explain the cross.

### Sin as Idolatry

In *Counterfeit Gods*, Keller further elaborates on his thesis that the basic problem of the human condition is the problem of idolatry. With a skillful interplay of biblical narratives, he demonstrates that the personal human condition is characterized by a quest for romantic love, financial prosperity or political success. He also argues that Western culture is also dominated by idols, both in business and in religion. Keller's analysis and application of the story of Jonah is telling in this regard:

When an idol gets a grip on your heart, it spins out a whole set of false definitions of success and failure and happiness and sadness. It redefines reality in terms of itself. Nearly everyone thinks that an all-powerful God of love, patience and compassion is a good thing. But if, because of your idol, your ultimate good is the power and status of your people, then anything that gets in the way of it is, by definition, bad. When God's love prevented him from smashing Israel's enemy, Jonah, because of his idol, was forced to see God's love as a bad thing. In the end idols can make it possible to call evil good and good evil.

Keller's working of the concept of idolatry is an interesting one. He suggests that a failure to appreciate the difference between the true God and the idols to which we are enslaved becomes ultimately a failure to deal with guilt and shame:

Idols function like gods in our lives, and so if we make career or parental approval our god and we fail it, then the idol curses us in our hearts for the rest of our lives. We cannot shake off the sense of failure.

For Keller, idolatry is not simply one expression of sin, but the root out of which every sin arises. On the basis of Paul's argument in Romans 1:21, 25, Keller suggests that for Paul 'idolatry is not only one sin among many, but what is fundamentally wrong with the human heart'; and although he acknowledges that 'Paul goes on to make a long list of sins that create misery and evil in the world', his main line of reasoning is that 'they all find their roots in this soil, the inexorable human drive for "god-making"'. This, he suggests, is also the reason that the Ten Commandments open with a prohibition against idolatry: 'We never break the other commandments without breaking the first one.'

Keller goes on to explain the experience of forgiveness as a rejoicing in what Christ has done for us. He says that 'it is when we rejoice over Jesus' sacrificial love for us most fully that, paradoxically, we are most truly convicted of our sin'. His suggestion that idols are almost always good things is well taken; there is nothing inherently wrong in the things on which people set their hearts. It is the displacement of God in the human heart that is wrong.

The gospel impacts us through the spiritual disciplines of worship, 'and it is worship that is the final way to replace the idols of your heart. You cannot get relief simply by figuring out your

idols intellectually. You have to actually get the peace that Jesus gives, and that only comes as you worship. Analysis can help you discover truths, but then you need to “pray them in” to your heart.’ This replacement of idols with a passion for Christ is, Keller suggests in the epilogue, the work of a lifetime.

Here then is Keller’s basic thesis both of our condition and God’s remedy for it. Our problem is the problem of idolatry, which may take many forms, but is basically the taking of things that are essentially good and worthwhile, and making them our substitute gods. Our enslavement to them leads to a distortion of reality and a corresponding failure to experience the peace of forgiveness; only by treasuring Christ can the distortion be righted.

Part of the problem with this approach is its subjectivity. When Keller says in *Center Church* that ‘The biblical theme of idolatry challenges contemporary people ... It shows them that, paradoxically, if they don’t serve God, they are not, and can never be, as free as they aspire to be’, he sounds more like a life coach than a gospel preacher. The primary focus of the gospel is to restore our relationship with God, not our personal well-being. This is made crystal clear in Paul’s resounding appeal in 2 Corinthians 5:20 “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” Consequently, the sinner can only be reconciled to God, not through worship, or subjectively treasuring Jesus, but objectively through repentance towards God and faith in Jesus Christ. (Acts 20:21)

For all Keller’s discussion of biblical narratives, however, it is difficult to agree with him that Paul’s basic thesis in Romans 1 is that idolatry is the basic human problem, the soil out of which every sin grows. It could be argued that this is to reverse the Pauline argument, which is that unrighteousness, or sin, leads to a suppression of the knowable truth about God, which in turn is expressed by creature worship instead of by Creator worship. For Paul, the idolatry is the symptom, not the cause. A case could be made that while Paul argues for a basic, inexcusable and unjustifiable condition of fallenness which finds expression in idolatry, Keller has actually turned this on its head, and made the idolatry the basic issue, and every other sin a symptom and result of it.

Paul’s thesis is that the gospel is God’s power for salvation to everyone who believes. This is the foundation upon which the argument of Romans is built: every one of us is inexcusable, and consequently every one of us is in need of an objective atonement. But that is part of the problem in *Counterfeit Gods*: although there is reference to God’s unconditional love and costly grace, alongside references to Jesus’ costly death, there is little explanation here of what the gospel means, or what it is that Jesus actually did. The emphasis falls on our use of spiritual disciplines as a means to replacing our idols, and on the getting rid of idols as a means to overcoming guilt and shame. Without qualification, such subjectivism can actually serve to turn the gospel on its head.

Keller excels in *Counterfeit Gods* in unpacking the symptoms of sin. His use of the concept of idolatry is well grounded in the biblical narrative: we are warned, after all, in the Epistles of John, to keep ourselves from idols (1 John 5:21). Idolatry was not merely an Old Testament phenomenon. Keller is in fact echoing one of Calvin’s great descriptions of the heart of man as

‘a perpetual factory of idols’. His application of the concept of idolatry to the condition of modern man is therefore a timely use of a biblical and theological motif.

It has to be said that more than a mere ‘rebranding’ is going on here. Without careful parameters, the confusion of symptom and cause becomes problematic. There is no doubt that modern man is expert in the manufacture of idols, and Keller’s work bridges the ancient text and modern psychology at a variety of levels. Nevertheless, he does this by failing to give a full definition of sin. Sin is not idol-making but law-breaking, of which the manufacturing of idols is a specific example. The truth of the human condition is not merely that we make idols, but that we are, by nature, enslaved to law-breaking.

On this point, Douglas Vickers’ observation is apposite:

Sin...as it is presented to us in the Scriptures, does not have primary reference to our actions and to what we do or do not do. That aspect of its meaning must, of course, be clearly acknowledged and understood. But sin in its essence has primarily to do with the state and condition in which, as a result of Adam’s fall, we actually exist ... By our fall into the ‘estate of sin’, we were deprived of our original holiness and righteousness, and we were depraved in the corruption of our whole nature.

The condition of man under sin is much more serious than Keller’s presentation would suggest; we do not simply manufacture idols. We are enslaved in a condition of implacable hostility to God. One looks in vain for a robust answer to that condition on the pages of *Counterfeit Gods*.

Sin as Lostness

The missing portion in *Counterfeit Gods* might have been supplied in *The Prodigal God*, since Keller’s stated aim in it is ‘to lay out the essentials of the Christian message, the gospel’. The title of the book is an interesting twist on the more familiar title of the story in Luke 15 which we know as the Prodigal Son. The more well-known title was designed to draw our attention to the recklessness of the wayward son, but its inadequacy is explained by Keller in two ways: first, that there were two sons in the story, and not just the prodigal one; and second, that the recklessness by which we are struck is that of the father who welcomes the lost son more than the recklessness of the son himself.

It might seem like nit-picking to quibble with the title, the justification for which Keller offers in a paragraph in the foreword. On the basis of his definition of ‘prodigal’ as ‘recklessly spendthrift....to spend until you have nothing left’, Keller suggests that what was true of the son in a negative sense became true of the father in a positive sense. But the father was anything but reckless in his lavish bestowal of gifts on the wayward son; and God is not diminished in his giving his all for us. In my view, it is difficult to justify the use of prodigality as an attribute of God, whom the father in the parable clearly represents.

From the very outset of the study, Keller rightly draws our attention to the fact that Jesus did not tell his story as an evangelistic tool, but as a polemic and a provocative one at that. It was easy for the religious leaders of his day, as it is still, to look down on those whose lives were

flagrantly immoral. Indeed, the occasion of the three-dimensional parable of Luke 15 was the sneering response of the religious leaders to Jesus: 'this man receives sinners!' (Luke 15:2).

In many ways the force of the story is not so much in the son who left home and who squandered what he had, but in the son, who stayed and yet was equally lost. Keller is right when he says that 'Jesus is saying that both the irreligious and the religious are spiritually lost, both life-paths are dead ends, and that every thought the human race has had about how to connect to God has been wrong.'

He is also correct to emphasize that we must not finish the story before Jesus does. To be sure, the return of the wasteful son to his beneficent father is a powerful illustration of the fact that 'God's love and forgiveness can pardon and restore any and every kind of sin or wrongdoing.' But the story continues with the obstinate refusal of the elder brother to make much of his father's generosity.

Keller's interpretation of the elder brother comes in a chapter entitled 'Redefining sin'. He presses the point that both sons were lost, the one by being bad and the other by being good. The son who went on the path of self-discovery, rejecting the strictures of home and family, was evidently lost; it was not so evident in the case of the son who lived the life of moral rectitude and self-satisfaction.

In the case of the elder brother we have what Keller calls 'a much deeper concept of "sin"', going beyond the idea of failing to keep God's rules of conduct. The elder brother had been fastidious in his efforts to keep the father's rules. Yet 'Jesus ... shows us that a man who has violated virtually nothing on the list of moral misbehaviors can be every bit as spiritually lost as the most profligate, immoral person.' The elder brother could not appreciate that by attempting to place the father in his debt he was 'more distant and alienated from the father than his brother, because he was blind to his true condition'.

This 'elder brother lostness' is deep and damaging. Resentful of others and living a life of 'joyless, fear-based compliance', the elder brother knows nothing of grace. Like all who seek to place God in their debt, he is 'in a prison of their own making'. And at the heart of that problem is a failure 'to repent of the sin under all our other sins and under all our righteousness - the sin of seeking to be our own Savior and Lord'.

The only remedy for such a condition, according to Keller, is that we appreciate the costliness of pardon: 'You need to be moved by the sight of what it cost to bring you home.' In order to demonstrate this, Keller turns a key element of the parable on its head, portraying Jesus as the true elder brother, whose sacrifice on the cross is what alone will change our self-centeredness: 'To the degree we "see his beauty" we will be free from the fear and neediness that creates either younger brothers or elder brothers.'

Keller then emphasizes the festal element of the story. The father threw a party for his wayward son. There was rejoicing and dancing. Keller applies this to the idea that salvation is 'experiential', not abstract: 'If you are filled with shame and guilt you do not merely need to believe in the abstract concept of God's mercy. You must sense, on the palate of the heart, as it were, the sweetness of his mercy. Then you will know you are accepted.' This, more than any

theoretical notion of God's forgiveness, is what will turn our self-reliance to reliance on the mercy of God. It will also, as Keller presses home in the book's concluding chapter, restructure and reorientate our life in radical new ways.

Most reviews of Keller's work have been enthusiastic, and some confidently assert that Keller will have influenced the way in which the parable of the prodigal son will be preached in future. However, at the level of exegesis, Keller's *The Prodigal God* is both helpful and misleading.

Keller is helpful in the emphasis he places on the elder brother of the story. In many ways the elder brother is the key figure, since the three stories were all told by Jesus in response to the graceless and wholly inappropriate attitude of the Pharisees in response to Christ's table fellowship with repentant sinners.

To the extent that Keller has highlighted the gracelessness of the self-righteous in the parable, he has helpfully explained the parable for us. And although it is debatable whether we are required to view the elder brother as actually lost, his discussion of the matter has nonetheless highlighted a much-needed emphasis at the present time: that it is as possible to be lost inside the church as outside. Indeed, if the Westminster Confession of Faith is right to say that outside the church there is 'no ordinary possibility of salvation' (WCF 25:2), then to be lost *within* its pale is the greater tragedy.

Where Keller is less than helpful, and, indeed, misleading, is in his over-spiritualizing of other details of the narrative. The discussions, for example, of chapter 6 on 'redefining hope' and of chapter 7 on 'the feast of the Father' tend to exaggerate minor details within the story. Both the home and the feast play important roles in highlighting both the lostness of the son(s) and the lavish grace of the father, but Keller has tended to give them a disproportionate emphasis which rather distracts from the central and key points of the story.

Indeed, for Keller to deduce from the festal element of the parable the doctrine that 'for Jesus, this material world matters', and to go on to argue for social justice, is highly questionable. What he says is the truth; but it is doubtful that it is the truth taught in the text of Luke 15. In spite of his insistence that 'we can't press every single detail literally', Keller comes close to doing precisely that.

Coupled with this is the introduction into Keller's exposition of the story of Jesus as the better elder brother. Is it the case that 'by putting a flawed elder brother in the story, Jesus is inviting us to imagine and yearn for a true one'? The point of the story is not, surely, that Jesus, our true elder brother, paid the total cost of our pardon. Keller arrives here through a tendentious link to the father's statement to the elder brother in the story that 'all that I have is yours' (Luke 15:31, NKJV), implying that part of the elder brother's estate was used to welcome the younger brother home. The element which binds the three stories of Luke 15 together is the rejoicing over what is lost (Luke 15:7, 10, 32), not the cost of the forgiveness. If that is part of the narrative, it is highlighted in what the Father did, not what Jesus as our true elder brother did.

More fundamental, however, is the notion of sin which Keller 'redefines' (according to the title of chapter 3). The presentation of the elder brother is of one who is morally upright and superior, 'lost, yet who has no sins on the list'. Keller is careful not to give the impression that

such a creature actually exists; the only man who ever lived with no sins on the list was Christ himself. The problem lay in the elder brother's self-image, mirroring the self-righteousness and self-interest of so many of the religious leaders of Jesus' day.

Nevertheless, it will not do to suggest that the sin of moralism, any more than the sin of immorality, can be defined without recourse to God's law. After all, the 'immoderate setting of our mind, will or affections upon other things, and taking them off [God] in whole or in part' is among the sins forbidden in the first commandment. The nature of sin is still to be deduced from God's law, and defined as a breach of it, despite the apparent immaculateness of our life. Jesus demonstrated this in the 'Sermon on the Mount'. He makes it explicitly clear to his disciples that "... unless your righteousness exceeds that of scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven". Matt 5:20. Jesus then explained that keeping the Commandments was not merely a matter of outward conformity but also of inward compliance. Matt 5:22, 28.

So, when Keller argues that 'sin is not just breaking the rules, it is putting yourself in the place of God as Savior, Lord and Judge', he is rather begging the question. To place oneself in the place of God *is* breaking the rules; the sin of the elder brother is a violation of the law. It is an over-simplification to suggest that 'There are two ways to be your own Savior and Lord. One is by breaking all the moral laws and setting your own course, and one is by keeping all the moral laws and being very, very good.' Even allowing for the rhetorical flourish, the statement is misleading.

Like *Counterfeit Gods*, *The Prodigal God* is an attempt to cross the divide between the ancient text and modern culture. It is a further 'rebranding' of motifs which may well be familiar to frequent and regular readers of the biblical narrative, but which make little sense to man in the twenty-first century. Yet where the work falls short is in the lack of reference to God's law as that without which it is impossible to define sin. Immoral living leads to lostness in the same way as moralism does — by a mindset that is not subject to God's law, and cannot be (Rom. 8:7). The gospel offers more than a sight of home; it offers an objective ground of atonement based on the law-keeping of Jesus.

Keller knows this, of course. But it is doubtful whether a reader of *The Prodigal God* would. The story of the prodigal son, understandably, cannot be the basis for an atonement theory, since that is not the question with which it deals. But nor can any treatment of it which attempts to present the gospel simply suggest that 'the basic operating principle of the gospel is "I am accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ — therefore I obey."' To do so is to run the risk of minimizing that very work and, thereby, to minimize the problem with which it deals, the problem of sin.

### Sin as Self-centeredness

In his work *King's Cross*, Keller takes his readers through the Gospel of Mark. The title captures brilliantly the twin themes of Mark's Gospel: Jesus as the promised King, and Jesus as the crucified Messiah. Keller's purpose, like Mark's, is that his readers 'find the figure of Jesus worthy of your attention'. And in his own remarkable style, Keller shows us the figure of Jesus as Mark portrays him.

From the outset, Keller identifies Jesus' preaching on the coming of the kingdom with the gospel, the good news of salvation. The problem to which the gospel of Christ is the solution is the problem of self-centeredness; that, Keller suggests, is the essence of the story of the fall and the disintegration of man in Genesis 3: 'When we decide to be our own center, our own king, everything falls apart: physically, socially, spiritually and psychologically ... a true king will come back to put everything right and renew the entire world. The good news of the kingdom of God is this: Jesus is that true King.'

*King's Cross* is an interesting journey through Mark's Gospel, and Keller has some refreshing insights into the Markan narrative. He also has some interesting perspectives on sin, such as his treatment of the paralyzed man who was brought to Jesus for healing. Keller is exactly right to state that 'Jesus knows something the man doesn't know — that he has a much bigger problem than his physical condition.' That is the problem of sin, concerning which Keller says:

When the Bible talks about sin it is not just referring to the bad things we do. It's not just lying or lust or whatever the case may be — it is ignoring God in the world he has made; it's rebelling against him by living without reference to him. It's saying, 'I will decide exactly how I live my life.' And Jesus says that is our main problem.

Keller's thesis throughout *King's Cross* is that Jesus saves us by removing that innate self-centeredness. The healing of the paralyzed man demonstrates that true restoration has to be a deep work of grace:

We need someone who can go deeper....Someone who will use his claws, lovingly and carefully, to pierce our self-centeredness and remove the sin that enslaves us and distorts even our beautiful longings. In short, we need to be forgiven. That's the only way for our discontent to be healed. It will take more than a miracle worker or a divine genie — it will take a Savior.'

Early in Mark's Gospel, however, we are introduced to the controversy in which Jesus found himself at odds with the religious leaders of his day — the issue of Sabbath-keeping and, therefore, the issue of the whole purpose of the law of God. Keller is right to remind us that the provision of Sabbath rest in the Mosaic law was a remarkable concession from God — he says, quite memorably, that 'the Sabbath is about restoring the diminished'. The Pharisees and other leaders had become over-concerned about regulating behavior instead of seeing the God-given provision of the Sabbath for what it was.

Keller's explanation of the conflict is to view it in terms of two different paradigms for obeying God's law: religion and gospel. In the former, law-keeping is always burdensome, because religion comes with advice, with a code of conduct, with the logic 'If I perform, if I obey, I'm accepted.' The gospel paradigm comes with news: 'I'm fully accepted in Jesus Christ, and therefore I obey.' Keller's application of this is that for the religious person, the burden is to know exactly what the law requires, and to follow it with detailed observance in order to win God's favor. But for the Christian the law functions differently: knowing that we have been

delivered from sin, Keller says, 'God's law takes you out of yourself; it shows you how to serve God and others instead of being absorbed with yourself.'

Keller underscores this by his interpretation of Jesus' claim in Mark 2:28 to be Lord of the Sabbath. For Keller this means that something more than that a regular, weekly, one-day Sabbath is required:

Jesus means that he is the Sabbath. He is the source of the deep rest we need. He has come to completely change the way we rest. The one-day-a-week rest we take is just a taste of the deep divine rest we need, and Jesus is its source.

More than that, Keller argues that Jesus' assertion to be Lord of the Sabbath is a claim to divinity. That is certainly true; the claim is nothing if not a self-conscious identification of Jesus with the God who gave the commandment in the first place. One corollary of this is that 'all sins are against him', since he is the 'uncreated, transcendent, eternal Creator'.

But Keller concludes from all of this that 'Because the Lord of the Sabbath said, "It is finished," we can rest from religion — forever.' This conclusion has come too far from the premise that the opposition Jesus faced was from religious leaders. Did Jesus come to abolish religion?

Jesus certainly took issue, not least on the Sabbath question, with those who had turned religion on its head and made it a self-serving, self-righteous enterprise. But this does not mean that he had no interest in institutional religion; there is not a shred of evidence to suggest that true faith and biblical religion are mutually exclusive. Keller has done the church a disservice with the suggestion that faith in Christ is the end of religion. It is actually its beginning. The Bible recognises that often what goes by the name of religion is false, being characterised by idolatry as Paul discovered in Athens. Nevertheless, God's Word acknowledges that the practice of biblical Christianity is an expression of true religion. "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit widows and orphans in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." James 1:27.

More serious, in my view, is Keller's exegesis of the Sabbath-fulfillment in Christ. His view is typical of many evangelical theologians for whom the actualization of the fourth commandment in this age of the Spirit is in its spiritualization: Jesus is the Sabbath (so Keller argues), and therefore we sanctify the Sabbath by resting in him.

This position on the fourth commandment has become something of a given in modern evangelicalism. Keller's view is typical of theologians who are reluctant to hold the traditional position that the resurrection of Jesus Christ has altered the Sabbath from the last day of the week to the first, and that by observing a new Sabbath, on each Lord's Day, we bring the Sabbath commandment into its own by our worship, rest and profession of the risen Christ.

It is difficult, however, to justify Keller's position. If the law of God is not entirely abolished (which Keller concedes it cannot be, since the gospel forces us to approach the law with a different paradigm from that of religion), then the commandment to keep the Sabbath holy remains. On Keller's own admission, it must remain as an element which a Christian should

‘study and obey ... in order to discover the kind of life you should live in order to please and resemble the one who created and redeemed you’.

The problem, of course, is that spiritualizing the commandment is not obeying it; nor does it exhaust its meaning or relevance. The transition from seventh day of the week Sabbath to first day of the week Lord’s Day was a natural one for the church to make in the wake of the resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit. The principles of redemption and grace which the older form of the commandment embodied had come into their own. The gospel means nothing if it does not mean resting in Christ. But this certainly does not exhaust the requirement of a command from God which regulates our week and calls for a day of rest and of worship.

There is no doubt that a legalistic sabbatarian position is as inimical to the gospel now as it was in Jesus’ day. But to call Jesus ‘Lord’ involves conceding the New Testament Sabbath to be under his lordship. What else gave John the apostle the motivation to observe each Lord’s Day as a day of worship of his risen Lord (Rev. 1:10)? What could be more fitting for believers in this age of the Spirit than to lay aside their work in order to fulfill their duty of rejoicing in the day that the Lord has made for them? To be sure, there is a glorious anticipation in the weekly, new covenant Sabbath of the rest that waits in glory for the people of God (Heb. 4:9). But the fourth commandment is not fulfilled or honored by interpreting it in a non-literal way. It is also contrary to the expressed teaching of the Westminster divines in the chapter on the Sabbath in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF chp 21).

Keller takes up his discussion of sin in dealing with the controversy between Jesus and the religious leaders over ceremonial cleanness. He correctly identifies one of the problems of our contemporary society as a problem over the experience of guilt without the explanation of sin: ‘We don’t believe in sin, and yet we still feel that there’s something wrong with us.’

Keller takes Jesus’ statement that it is what is within a man that makes him unclean (Mark 7:20-23) as highlighting the fact that ‘We are what’s wrong. It’s what comes out from the inside. It’s the self-centeredness of the human heart. It’s sin.’ With refreshingly evangelical flair, Keller goes on to highlight that the human problem is not something on the outside that can be corrected by morality, politics, culture or religion; the problem is our heart: ‘No matter what we do, or how hard we try, external solutions do not deal with the soul.’ The priestly activity of Jesus, being made sin for us, is the only remedy for failure and guilt.

Indeed, as Keller discusses the necessity of the atoning death of Christ, we find ourselves on more solid ground. There is, he argues, a legal necessity for the death of Christ, for his having been made sin. There is a penalty to be borne, and a price to be paid. There is retribution which he alone must bear and experience if we are to have peace with God. ‘Sin always entails a penalty,’ Keller argues. ‘Guilt can’t be dealt with unless someone pays.’

That is exactly right. Keller cannot adequately explain the atonement without recourse to the guilt that sin brings; and he knows that that guilt cannot be explained without reference to the law. The weakness in his discussion is that the categories of law by which he explains Jesus’ death, and his being made sin for us, are not the categories by which he explains our own native guilt and sin. Our derangement is not merely our self-centeredness; it is our law-

breaking. We have contracted guilt in the same way as Christ must atone for it: through the curse of a broken law. That emphasis, prominent in Keller's treatment of the atonement, is lacking in his discussions on the nature and consequences of sin.

The overarching concept of sin in *King's Cross* as self-centeredness is one to which Keller returns in his discussion of Mark's treatment of the cross. There is a darkness which engulfs the world as Jesus dies at Calvary. Keller explains this in terms of isolation and loss of identity: 'If you center on anything but God, you will suffer a loss of identity ... you don't really know who you are. In the darkness you can't see yourself.' To be estranged from God is to be orbiting around something other than God, and to be 'on a trajectory toward a life of disintegration'.

Keller has some moving insights into the reason Jesus was plunged into darkness in his death, that we might experience the light of God's truth and blessing. 'His was perfect obedience in our place.' But this begs the question. In place of what? In place of our disobedience is the only adequate answer. The gospel that focuses on Calvary is the solution to the objective problem of disobedience, not merely the subjective problem of self-centeredness.

Keller knows this, and he often uses the language of substitution as he references the work of Christ on the cross. He describes the death of Jesus in his chapter on 'The Cup' in these terms: 'On the cross Jesus got what we deserved: the sin, guilt and brokenness of the world fell upon him. He loved us so much he took divine justice on himself so that we could be passed over, forever.' But again, the problem is in the rebranding; the agonies of the cross require a deeper, more forensic explanation than Keller provides. Sin as self-centeredness is a *symptom* of, not a reason for, our condition. The paradigm of Scripture is that we are fallen by nature and lie under the curse of a broken covenant and the penalty of a broken law. This, however, is not a theme prominent in Keller's writings.

### Sin and Culture

Keller is aware of two things: first, that the gospel is the only remedy for man's condition; and secondly, that the church can only preach that gospel in the culture within which it finds itself. Redeemer Presbyterian Church is committed to societal transformation through the application of these two core principles, as is stated in the church's vision statement: 'To build a great city for all people through a gospel movement that brings personal conversion, community formation, social justice and cultural renewal to New York City and, through it, to the world.'

Keller's writings reflect these emphases. The work of Jesus Christ, dying on the cross, rising from the dead and ascending to heaven, undergirds the presentation of the good news of the gospel in Keller's literature: 'The bondage of sin is broken', he writes in the workbook *Gospel in Life*, 'when we come out from under the law — when we begin to believe the gospel of Christ's-work-salvation.' But only in *King's Cross* is any extended treatment given to what Christ's work for us was; passing references in his other books tend to refer to it rather tendentiously, with the summary statement recurring more than once that the gospel operates on the principle that 'I am accepted by God through the work of Jesus Christ.'

On the other hand, his writings are replete with cultural references, in which Keller does two things. First, he shows us his wide-ranging grasp of cultural media and the spiritual values they

express. He does not do this to display his knowledge, but to trawl contemporary culture to expose its emptiness, much as Solomon did in the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Second, he is making connections with those for whom knowledge of contemporary cinema, for example, is not only more attractive, but more life-transforming than knowledge of Scripture. He knows that bridges are built to connect particular points and, as a contemporary apologist, he wants to build a bridge between the timeless message of the church and the time-bound situation of contemporary culture.

To do this, he has attempted to redefine, in meaningful terms, the basic need of the human heart. The burden of this chapter has been that the trade-off between holding on to a biblical doctrine of sin and rebranding the concept to make it attractive to the modern sinner has resulted in a loss of substantive meaning. Symptoms have been marketed as causes, and basic biblical categories for sin, not least the emphasis on sin as the breaking of God's law, and fallenness in Adam as the primary condition of our lives, have rarely been highlighted in Keller's writings at all. At the very least this is a major theological weakness.

The attempt to define biblical concepts in culturally sensitive categories is a difficult one. Keller himself is not unaware of the difficulty. He writes:

Depicting sin as an act of misplaced love, not just a violation of law, is more compelling to many people in our culture today. Of course, a complete biblical description of sin and grace must recognize our rebellion against the authority of God's law.

It is that 'of course' that opens the door to confusion and uncertainty. Where does the culturally compelling theology find that 'of course'? When we have rebranded our foundational doctrines in a manner that is persuasive and irresistible to our culture, how do we then bring the 'complete biblical description' to that culture? This, ultimately, is where Keller's rebranding leads — to an attempt to define sin not in terms of what it does to God, in robbing him of his glory, but of what it does to us, in robbing us of our wholeness. As a consequence, it is difficult to know whether some things are sins some of the time, or all of the time. Some websites, for example, have highlighted Keller's ambiguity, wariness and discomfort over identifying homosexual practice as sinful.

It has also profound implications for our missiology. Are we to rebrand the biblical doctrine of sin afresh in every cultural engagement? One recent review of *Center Church* urges the reader to 'go and construct your own theological vision for the place and time that God has put you in his redemptive purposes'. That is an approach remarkably similar to the 'emergent church' position.

We can all learn from Keller's approach. I am grateful for the constant reminder in his writings that moralizing can be just as sinful as immorality, and that sin is a multiplex and multi-faceted reality. But unless I am on firm ground in my definitions, I will mislead in my presentation of the gospel. Ultimately, the gospel is not about me at all. It is certainly *for* me, but it is *about* the God whom I have offended, and about the Christ whom he punished in my place. The offense? That I have broken his holy law, and break it constantly, of which my idolatry, and lostness and

self-centeredness are symptoms. The remedy? That it is possible for the perfect law-keeping life and penalty-bearing death of another to restore my relationship with God.

Much as I admire, and learn from, Keller's efforts to make these truths known to contemporary society, I fear that these foundational truths of the biblical gospel have been obscured in the rebranding. Indeed, I wonder about the extent to which a rebranding is necessary at all.

In an article on the nature of the gospel, D. A. Carson reminds us that an appreciation of the nature of the gospel of free grace in Christ requires a full-orbed view of sin:

...we gain clarity regarding the gospel when we discern what the gospel addresses, what it fixes. If we focus on just one element of the desperate need - say our broken horizontal relationships - then by ignoring all the other dimensions of our sin, including the most fundamental dimension, namely, our rebellion against God and the consequent wrath we have rightly incurred, we may marginalize or even abandon crucial elements of the gospel that address our sin. After all, the Bible speaks of the wrath of God more than six hundred times. If we cannot grasp how the gospel of Jesus Christ addresses all these dimensions of our desperate need, we will invariably promulgate an anemic and truncated gospel.

It is to be feared that Keller's attempt at rebranding the biblical doctrine of sin, highlighting as it does some key elements while obscuring others, leads to just such a truncating of the gospel.