

Timothy Keller's Hermeneutic: an example for the church to follow?

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Introduction

Dr. Keller is rightly acclaimed as an effective communicator. His style is persuasive and rhetorically accomplished; to read him is almost to hear him. In this, Keller follows perfectly his model C. S. Lewis's advice: 'Always write (and read) with the ear, not the eye. You should hear every sentence you write as if it was being read aloud or spoken.'¹ Not many Christian authors have managed to follow Lewis's advice, but Keller is a welcome exception. The church needs more able communicators and we would all do well to emulate him in this regard.

However, the minister's task consists of more than effective communication. When Paul summed up the nature of the Christian ministry, he did so in terms of being a faithful steward of the mysteries of God (1 Cor. 4:1–2; 9:17; Col. 1:23–25). If this is the case—that we are ultimately to be measured by the faithfulness of what we communicate rather than the effectiveness of how we do it—then our primary concern must always remain the sound interpretation of Scripture.

Our work as biblical interpreters is indeed at the core of what we do. The preacher or author must therefore undergird his end conclusions with careful work done in the study, and provide a sufficient sampling of this work to enable the audience to recognize that he is teaching God's truth rather than his own opinions. While it is true that we need not exhibit all of our exegetical spadework in every sentence, our audience needs to be assured that our conclusions are well-founded. In order to do this, moreover, our exegesis must be in accordance with accepted hermeneutic principles. This is how we validate conclusions in Christian discourse.

In this regard—as a demonstration of good hermeneutical practice—it is less certain that Keller's work provides us with the best of examples to follow.² Just to be clear, there is no question as to whether his works are intended to convey the contents of the Bible; it is obvious that this is his desire. Nor is it a question as to whether Keller gets it right more often than he gets it wrong in his exegesis. The question is to what extent Keller consistently adheres to good hermeneutic practice in his writing and, in particular, whether the church should consider his work as a model to emulate.

We would not want to give the impression that we are quibbling with Keller over debatable matters, so we shall begin by looking at our hermeneutical norm. It is sometimes assumed that hermeneutics is itself a nebulous pursuit to be governed more by personal opinion than by acknowledged standards. Such an approach to the Bible would be nearly as disastrous as rejecting it outright. Thankfully, Scripture itself informs us how we are to read it. Moreover, these principles have been clearly articulated in the confessional documents of the orthodox tradition. The particular statement of hermeneutic practice that will guide our discussion will be

that of the Westminster Standards, particularly the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and the section 'Of the Preaching of the Word' in the Directory for the Publick Worship of God (DPW).

The Westminster Hermeneutic

A Reformed position on hermeneutics may well be defined as the Westminster position on hermeneutics.³ The fundamental principle advanced by the Divines is that Scripture is its own interpreter. At a time when it is de rigueur to come at the Bible from a position somewhere on the outside, the proposition that 'The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself' (WCF 1:9) provides a much-needed corrective. This means, among other things, that extra-biblical sources may never control our interpretation. Whatever insights disciplines such as social anthropology, literary theory, second temple Judaism and discourse analysis might offer, none of these things should ever be made the key to understanding Scripture.

This fundamental principle also means that, where there is a question about the true and full sense of Scripture, we employ as our basic tool the *analogia scriptura* (analogy of Scripture). In other words, inspired Scripture acts as its own interpretive guide. The Confession acknowledges that 'All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all' (WCF 1:7); there will be occasions when the right understanding of a passage is not immediately obvious. However, such things may 'be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly' (WCF 1:9).

While this is a wonderfully simple principle, it is certainly not simplistic. Comparing texts requires understanding of their doctrinal content and didactic import. That is why the *analogia scripturae* is virtually synonymous with a Protestant understanding of the *analogia fidei* (analogy of faith): the ability to rightly interpret Scripture is predicated upon a firm grasp of the scriptural faith.

So we are never left merely to speculation or to our own private opinions with regard to understanding what Scripture actually teaches. Furthermore, when texts do not speak directly to a point, we apply the principle of necessary inference: 'The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture' (WCF 1:6). The Westminster Assembly took great care to safeguard the interpretive method so as to avoid, on the one hand, specious exegesis and, on the other, the ever-present threat of eisegesis (reading into the text). The former is the result of superficial comparisons, and the latter the product of hermeneutical predispositions.

There is, of course, room for exegetical differences. The Assembly was not itself hermeneutically monolithic; the Divines recognized this when they acknowledged that Scripture is not alike in all places 'plain'. But they were concerned to keep exploration and debate within the boundaries of the agreed system and distillation of doctrine which became the doctrinal standard and tradition of English-speaking Reformed churches. A confessional hermeneutic provides an essential safeguard against exegetical, hermeneutical and doctrinal

aberration, while providing a safe environment for exploration and discussion.

As Reformed people, we should not be afraid of these parameters. We should embrace them as the safe and sure guide that they are. Nor should we succumb to the anachronistic sentiment that, because the Assembly failed to address all of today's issues, we need to break the mould and kick over the traces. At the basic level, 'there is nothing new under the sun' (Eccles. 1:9), and in many cases new errors prove simply to be restatements of old heresies which the Divines knew about. As for the few cases that remain, this is why some Presbyterian churches have modified the confession at some point in their history. After nearly four centuries, however, such modifications remain remarkably few and minor, evidence not of the church's inactivity but of the Confession's adequacy. To the extent that it is an accurate and comprehensive summary of biblical doctrine, it remains as valid throughout time and place as Scripture itself. To borrow an expression from current hermeneutical theory, the Confession sets forth 'supra-cultural' truth and principles. This is certainly the case with regard to the hermeneutical method it teaches.

The point of this preamble is that successful exegesis is a matter neither of intuition nor of personal predisposition, but of sound principle and correct method. There is an objective standard for interpreting Scripture, and this standard can be taught. That does not mean that there are not obstacles to overcome. Seminarians learning exegesis for the first time are often as unaware of their own hermeneutical 'baggage' as they are of the proper hermeneutic method they have come to seminary to learn. Unaware of this baggage, they fail to appreciate the historical and linguistic distance between them and the text, with the usual result of reading their own experience into it. The remedy is to be able to distance ourselves ('distanciation'), which helps us get to grips with our personal hermeneutical predispositions and to combat the common problem of eisegesis or reading meaning into the text. Likewise we must be aware of the problem of superficial comparison, the idea that because texts are similar-looking or similar-sounding they necessarily speak to the same point.

Left unchecked, however, such weaknesses may produce an exercise not in exegesis but in distraction and suggestion. Instead of sound hermeneutics bringing our audience slowly but inexorably to the truth, we may end up convincing them through the illusory appearance of biblical warrant. It goes without saying that such should never be a substitute for careful exegesis carried on according to right principles.

The *Directory of Publick Worship* summarizes the principles of hermeneutics in the following way:

In raising doctrines from the text, his [the preacher's] care ought to be, *First*, That the matter be the truth of God. *Secondly*, That it be a truth contained in or grounded on that text, that the hearers may discern how God teacheth it from thence. *Thirdly*, That he chiefly insist upon those doctrines which are principally intended, and make most for the edification of the hearers.

The first of these criteria—that our concern must be to teach the truth of God—is hugely important, but it is difficult to evaluate in isolation. We shall therefore focus on the second and third elements mentioned, along with the element of ‘good and necessary consequence’ taken from the Confession itself (WCF 1:6). Thus we shall keep in mind the following questions: Do the interpretations represent the truth that is *chiefly taught* in that place? Are the *clearer parts* of Scripture used to interpret the less clear? And finally, are the deductions from Scripture *good and necessary consequences*?

Is Keller a good contemporary example of this Reformed methodology? As we examine examples of Keller’s demonstrated hermeneutic, we shall be looking at three potential problem areas in Keller’s writing:

(1) the *use of parables* as the main warrant for what is being taught or as the interpretive lens for the exegesis of other texts. This would be an apparent reversal of the principle that the clearer parts of Scripture should interpret the less clear (WCF 1:9).

(2) the *use of secondary aspects* in the text as the main warrant for what is being taught. This would be an apparent violation of the principle that we should ‘chiefly insist upon those doctrines which are principally intended’ (DPW) in any given text.

(3) the *use of logical fallacies* in exegesis. This would be an apparent violation of the principle that what we teach ‘is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture’ (WCF 1:6).

Again, we do not suggest that Keller falls into these problems intentionally, nor do we imagine that he is the only teacher to have fallen foul of them in the history of the church. Rather, the question is simply whether he should be held up as a contemporary example of how the church ought to be interpreting Scripture.

We consider first Keller’s use of parables.

1. Use of Parables

In general terms, the right exegesis of parables is a challenging business. Clearer parts of Scripture should interpret the less clear, and parables are certainly in the latter category. Jesus’ disciples are routinely unable to understand the meaning of the parables until they are explained to them, and for good reason. Christ tells them, ‘To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables ...’ (Luke 8:10). In other words, as they stand alone, parables are intended to be ambiguous. Thus, the only safe way to understand a parable is to pay close attention to the inspired interpretation that is usually given in the passage itself, and then by clearer texts elsewhere.

Some of Keller’s distinctive contributions are based upon parables. The most famous example would be *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith*, Keller’s paradigm-

shifting take on the prodigal son. In the introduction, Keller explains what particularly led him to write on the subject:

I almost felt I had discovered the secret heart of Christianity. Over the years I have often returned to teach and counsel from the parable. I have seen more people encouraged, enlightened, and helped by this passage, when I explained the true meaning of it, than by any other text.⁴

This all sounds rather exciting—‘I almost felt I had discovered the secret heart of Christianity.’ However, for those who are familiar with the history of the interpretation of this particular parable, the excitement is tempered with a degree of concern. The parable of the Prodigal Son was used as the main proof text for the principal doctrine of Liberalism, the universal spiritual fatherhood of God.⁵ More recently, a bishop who rejected even the idea of a personal God used this parable to support his thesis that salvation consists in psychological integration.⁶ If there is something about this particular parable that makes it so attractive a pretext for false theology, then it is only sensible that we think twice about new discoveries in it that promise to revolutionize our understanding of the Christian faith.

With that cautionary note in mind, we consider how Keller chooses to use this parable in *The Prodigal God*. The problem is in the very design of the book, which is to use this parable as a lens to understand everything else:

I am turning to this familiar story, found in the fifteenth chapter of the gospel of St. Luke, in order to get to the heart of the Christian faith. [...] I will demonstrate how the story helps us to understand the Bible as a whole.⁷

We have already seen that, according to Christ himself, parables are intentionally obscure. In the words of the Westminster Confession, ‘when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly’ (WCF 1:9). This being the case, one could hardly conceive of a concept more contrary to good hermeneutical procedure than to use a parable to define the Christian faith and, thereafter, to understand the rest of Scripture in this light. If in the course of his exposition Keller somehow manages to keep from error after turning the core tenet of interpretive practice completely on its head, he has still set a monumentally bad example.

Another example of Keller’s use of parables comes from his discussion of hell in *The Reason for God: Belief in An Age of Skepticism*. Although he quotes extensively from C. S. Lewis, Keller recognizes the need to show that this teaching—a self-chosen hell that God does not send people to, where people do not really want to leave, and in which the punishment comes primarily in the form of psychological disintegration—is to be found in Scripture.⁸ The passage chosen for this daunting task is the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16.

From the outset, Keller's procedure is highly problematic. The main biblical warrant for a given doctrine should not come from a parable. If other passages taught this doctrine, then the primary exegetical support should have come from them. If, on the other hand, Keller could not find clear support from among the scores of non-parabolic passages that speak about hell, then perhaps this should have been taken as a cautionary note. Once again, if Keller can somehow manage to stay away from serious problems after adopting such an ill-advised procedure, it will not be because he has exemplified the very best in hermeneutical practice.

To make matters worse, Keller then places great stress on certain aspects of the parable while largely ignoring others. We shall quote him at length:

Jesus's parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man in Luke 16 supports the view of hell we are presenting here. Lazarus is a poor man who begs at the gate of a cruel rich man. They both die and Lazarus goes to heaven while the rich man goes to hell. There he looks up and sees Lazarus in heaven 'in Abraham's bosom' [quotes Luke 16:24–31]. What is astonishing is that though their statuses have now been reversed, the rich man seems to be blind to what has happened. He still expects Lazarus to be his servant and treats him as his water boy. He does not ask to get out of hell, yet strongly implies that God never gave him and his family enough information about the afterlife. Commentators have noted the astonishing amount of denial, blame-shifting, and spiritual blindness in this soul in hell. They have also noted that the rich man, unlike Lazarus, is never given a personal name. He is only called a 'Rich Man,' strongly hinting that since he had built his identity on his wealth rather than on God, once he lost his wealth he lost any sense of a self.⁹

Let us just briefly note the points that Keller chooses to make: the rich man has lost touch with reality, he has lost his sense of self and he does not ask to get out of hell. The first is probably true, the second is an interesting but debatable point, and the third is a rather egregious argument from silence (that the rich man does not *want* to leave hell).

Now let us mention a couple of things that Keller passes over. First, the statements, 'And being in torments in Hades' and 'for I am tormented in this flame' (Luke 16:23–24) would seem to be good candidates to explain the nature (traditional hellfire) and source (imposed by God) of the rich man's suffering in hell. Second, the 'great gulf fixed' (Luke 16:26) would seem a better explanation for why the rich man cannot leave rather than the suggestion that he does not want to. It would appear that the only way that Keller can make this passage fit C. S. Lewis' idea of hell is by imposing a highly selective grid upon it. However, such expedients are only to be expected when parables are used in ways that are flatly contrary to the standards of Reformed hermeneutics.

2. Use of Secondary Aspects

The second area of concern is Keller's use of secondary aspects of the text as the main warrant for what he wishes to teach, an apparent violation of the principle that we should 'chiefly insist upon those doctrines which are principally intended' in any given text. One example of this would be Keller's interpretation of the incident with Miriam in Numbers 12: 'Between the

promise of Genesis 12 and its fulfillment in Revelation, the Bible strikes numerous blows against racism. Moses's sister Miriam was punished by God because she rejected Moses's African wife on account of her race (Numbers 12).¹⁰ Someone who was not familiar with this part of the Old Testament would probably suppose that if they turned to Numbers 12 they would find a statement explaining how God punished Miriam for her racism. Yet this is not at all what we find.

The passage begins with the statement 'Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses because of the Ethiopian woman whom he had married; for he had married an Ethiopian woman.' (Num. 12:1) Taken in complete isolation, it is theoretically possible that Aaron and Miriam were motivated by racism. However, read in light of the larger context, it is far more likely that they were accusing Moses of violating the divine prohibition against intermarriage with the pagans (Deut. 7:1–4; Ex. 34:11–16).

In any case, Keller's statement is not about Miriam's motivation but about God's reason for punishing her—'Miriam was punished by God because she rejected Moses's African wife on account of her race (Numbers 12).' However, this is certainly not the explanation that God Himself gives us:

Then he said, 'Hear now my words: If there is a prophet among you, I, the Lord, make myself known to him in a vision; I speak to him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. I speak with him face to face, even plainly, and not in dark sayings; and he sees the form of the Lord. Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?' So the anger of the Lord was aroused against them, and he departed (Num. 12:6–9).

God makes his rationale for rebuking Aaron and Miriam absolutely clear, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with racism. The Lord deemed Moses to be 'faithful in all my house' and had granted him the unprecedented privilege of speaking face to face. In light of this, God asks, 'Why then were you not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?' Miriam was punished by God not because 'she rejected Moses's African wife on account of her race' but because she disregarded the divinely-ordained authority of Moses. Keller passes on the opportunity to teach what is 'principally intended' by this text—and incidentally, rebellion against legitimate authority seems to be as common a contemporary sin as racism—but instead uses the relative detail of Moses' wife being of another race as the main warrant for something the passage does not teach at all.

Another example of this problem can be seen in Keller's treatment of the establishment of the diaconate in Acts 6:1–7.

Finally, in Acts 6, after the ministry of *diakonia* is more firmly established, Luke adds: 'So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly' (verse 7). The word 'so' indicates a cause-effect relationship. This sharing of resources across class lines—between the 'needy' and those wealthy enough to have property to sell—was extremely

rare in the Greco-Roman world. The practical actions of Christians for people in need was therefore striking to observers and made them open to the gospel message.¹¹

Based upon such a statement, we might expect to find some material in Acts 6 reporting how the people were amazed by the generosity of the Christians and therefore gave the gospel a hearing. Such reports are commonplace in the Book of Acts; on more than a dozen occasions Luke narrates the people's reaction to significant events along with the specific reason for their reaction.¹² However, in this particular case, we find nothing of the sort.

According to the apostles' explanation, the problem is that they were being distracted from their appointed mission: 'It is not desirable that we should leave the word of God and serve tables.' They therefore set up the diaconate with the express purpose that 'we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to the ministry of the word'. What follows from this single-minded focus on the means of grace is that 'the word of God spread'. Nothing at all is said about the church's sharing being observed by the outside world, nor that they found it striking, nor that this made them open to the gospel message. The statement 'The practical actions of Christians for people in need was therefore striking to observers and made them open to the gospel message' is a fascinating speculation, but it is patently not exegesis. Keller has again passed up the opportunity to teach what the passage seems primarily to convey—deacons should perform their function so that ministers can focus on prayer and the ministry of the word—and is using a superficial element as warrant for something the passage does not say.

One further example of Keller's sometimes limited attention to what the text principally intends—or control by clearer texts elsewhere—is found in *Ministries of Mercy*:

First, there is the question of the necessity of mercy to our very existence as Christians. We must not miss the fact that this parable is an answer to the question 'What must I do to inherit eternal life?' Jesus responds by pointing the law expert to the example of the Good Samaritan, who cared for the physical and economic needs of the man in the road. Bear in mind that Jesus was posed the very same question in Mark 10:17 by the rich young ruler. There, too, Jesus concludes by saying, 'Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor' (v. 21). It appears that Jesus sees care for the poor as part of the essence of being a Christian.¹³

Keller does not want us to 'miss the fact that the parable [of the Good Samaritan] is an answer to the question, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"' Jesus' initial response was to say, 'What is written in the law?' followed by 'You have answered rightly; do this and you will live' (Luke 10:28). In other words, Jesus was not defining 'the essence of being a Christian' but rather explaining the standards required for justification by works. Both the rich young ruler and the lawyer were attempting to justify themselves through their obedience to the law, and Jesus was disabusing them of their vain pretensions (the second use of the law, WCF 19:6). Keller acknowledges this very point later on in the book, but these things are left unconnected.¹⁴

In any case, 'care for the poor' unquestionably comes under the heading of law rather than gospel, and no element of our law-keeping could possibly be defined as 'part of the *essence* of being a Christian'.¹⁵ Keller is therefore right to then ask the question, 'Aren't we saved by faith in Christ alone? Then why does the ministry of mercy appear to be so central to the very definition of a Christian?' Strangely, however, he allows neither this central teaching of the Reformation found throughout Scripture nor his own understanding of the main purpose of the passage to discipline his exegesis, preferring to make the rhetorically powerful statement, 'Jesus sees care for the poor as part of the essence of being a Christian.'¹⁶

3. Logical Fallacies in Exegesis

Finally, we consider Keller's apparent use of logical fallacies in exegesis. We know that what we teach must be 'either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture' (WCF 1:6). Therefore, we must be careful that any implications we draw from the text are 'a good and necessary consequence' rather than a logical fallacy. However, such care is not always manifested in Keller's work.

One fallacy is shown in Keller's handling of obedience to the law in *The Prodigal God*:

Do you realize, then, what Jesus is teaching? Neither son loved the father for himself. They both were using the father for their own self-centered ends rather than loving, enjoying, and serving him for his own sake. This means that you can rebel against God and be alienated from him either by breaking his rules *or* by keeping all of them diligently. It's a shocking message: Careful obedience to God's law may serve as a strategy for rebelling against God.¹⁷

Keller's 'shocking message' is first of all dependent upon the supposition that the elder brother is intended to be seen as lost, an interpretation that is not self-evident in the context of Luke 15.¹⁸ However, for our purposes here, we will simply go along with this premise in order to point out that this conclusion still rests upon a fallacy. Keller's reasoning goes something like this:

The older brother claims to have obeyed his father.
Yet he is alienated from the father.
Therefore, careful obedience to the law may serve as a strategy for rebellion.

This is not a good inference for two reasons. First, we should know from the story of the rich young ruler that we cannot assume that just because someone claims to have followed the law they actually have done so (Matt 19:20).

Second, even if the elder brother has endeavored to keep the law, there is another explanation for why he might be alienated other than his law-keeping. Consider the following argument:

A man cuts the lawn every week.
Yet the lawn is brown and dead.

Therefore, conscientious mowing may serve as a strategy for killing the lawn.

There are, of course, other explanations for why the lawn might have died, such as the fact that it is infested with pests or has never been watered. Likewise, obedience to the law is always good in and of itself, but our relationship with God may yet be fatally undermined for other reasons (Rom 7). Keller surely knows this and could have stated things in a way that would have accurately conveyed the balanced biblical teaching, but to say that ‘Careful obedience to God’s law may serve as a strategy for rebelling against God’¹⁹ is exegetically indefensible.

Another relevant instance is found in *Ministries of Mercy*. After references to Romans 8, Psalm 96, C. S. Lewis, and Matthew 5, Keller works from Isaac Watts’ hymn ‘Joy to the World’:

No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make his blessings flow
Far as the curse is found!

The kingdom of God is the means for the renewal of the entire world and all the dimensions of life. From the throne of Jesus Christ flows new life and power such that no disease, decay, poverty, blemish, or pain can stand before it. If this is the ministry of the kingdom—to heal all the results of sin in all the areas of life, then the church must intentionally use its resources to minister in every ‘circle.’ We are to do not just evangelism but must be a ‘full-service’ body ... The Kingdom of God is power, God’s ruling power present to heal *all* the curse of sin.²⁰

First of all, it is inadvisable to derive warrant for adjusting the mission of the church from a hymn, no matter how well known. If Watts is simply paraphrasing Scripture on these points, it would have been better to stick with the actual texts.

The main problem, however, is with the logic of Keller’s ‘if, then’ transition between the future state and his conclusion regarding the church’s mission. Christ will certainly return on the last day to make a new heavens and a new earth in which no trace of the curse remains. Yet it is hardly obvious that this *future* eschatological reality entails that the *present* church militant must therefore ‘intentionally use its resources to minister in every “circle”’ and ‘be a “full-service body”’.²¹ Just because we are promised that there will be no curse in the New Heavens and New Earth, this does not mean that the church’s mission is to try to get there now, in contradiction of Scriptures that speak clearly on the matter (John 18:36; Matt 28:19–20; Mark 16:15). If our standard is to teach only those things which are either ‘expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture’ (WCF 1:6), this episode does not provide us with a good example.

Conclusion

The basic question we have raised in this paper is: Do Keller’s writings provide us with a consistent example of the Reformed hermeneutical method? More specifically, do his

interpretations represent the truth that is 'chiefly taught' in that place? Does he consistently allow the clearer parts of Scripture to interpret the less clear? And are his deductions from Scripture 'good and necessary consequences'? Based on the examples that we have seen, I think the answer would have to be that Keller is not consistent in adhering to these principles. It is true that, were we to look through almost any teacher's work, we would probably dig up some exegetical fallacies. Yet if there is any difference in this case, it would be the relative prominence of his departures from the standard; indeed, some of the distinctive contributions for which Keller is most well known are connected with them. For this reason, we must conclude that his work does not provide us with the best example to follow.

Expounding and applying Scripture is a huge, sometimes crushing, responsibility. It obliges us to demonstrate not just the validity of a certain way of arguing but the consistency of our conclusions with the infallible word of God. Everyone who seeks to sow the seed of that word has a duty to be clear in both understanding and presentation because we have no authority to say anything apart from it. Hermeneutical sleight of hand is ruled out; faithfulness is ruled in. We proceed carefully by means of appropriate exegetical and hermeneutical principles and then proclaim the message passionately, always insisting on 'those doctrines which are principally intended' (DPW). The church should continue to look for and emulate exemplary models of Reformed hermeneutic practice.

Endnotes

1. C. S. Lewis, *Letters* (London: Fount, 1988), p. 485.
2. Bryan Hickey writes 'In this latest work, Keller has been of great worth in showing Christian and non-Christian alike how to go about reading and understanding the scriptures': <http://thechiefend.net/2010/02/the-prodigal-god-hermeneutics-for-the-uninitiated/> (link no longer available).
3. As is widely understood, the Westminster Confession served as the basis for the 1658 Savoy Declaration (Congregationalist) and the 1689 Baptist Confession.
4. *Prodigal God*, p. xiii.
5. See, for example, J. Gresham Machen's discussion in Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp. 51–53.
6. See John Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press, 1965).
7. *Prodigal God*, pp. xii; xiv.
8. See *Reason for God*, pp. 76–80.
9. *Reason for God*, pp. 77–78.
10. *Generous Justice*, p. 123.
11. *Generous Justice*, pp. 140–141.
12. The Jerusalem pilgrims are amazed because the apostles spoke in their languages (Acts 2:7–13), the people are amazed because of Peter's healing of the man born lame (3:9–11), the people glorify God because of this miraculous healing, (4:21), fear fell upon those who hear about Ananias and Sapphira (5:11), the people esteem the apostles because of the signs and wonders they perform (5:12–13), Simon astonished the Samaritans because of his magic (8:9), the people are amazed because the persecuting Saul has become a believer (9:21), the people acclaim Herod in order to pacify him (12:20–22), the Lyconians think Paul and Barnabus are

gods because they healed a cripple (14:11), the Ephesian mob is confused because most did not know why they had assembled (19:32–34), the people of Jerusalem are stirred up against Paul (21:30–36), become more silent because he spoke to them in Hebrew (22:2), but then become irate when he mentions the Gentiles (21:21–23).

13. *Ministries of Mercy*, pp. 11–12.

14. Keller later correctly states Jesus' purpose: 'He was seeking to confound the law expert with a vision of selfless love so lofty as to be impossible. [...] Jesus' true goal was to show the law expert that as a self-justifier he was poor ...' (*Ministries of Mercy*, p. 59) Precisely. Christ is setting an impossible standard in order to show the lawyer the impossibility of self-justification. Why then does Keller think that this vision of *impossible* love is required of us all, without qualification? He says 'by the command "go and do likewise" Jesus commands us to provide shelter, finances, medical care, and friendship to people who lack them. We have nothing less than an order from our Lord in the most categorical of terms. "Go and do likewise!"' (*Ministries of Mercy*, p. 11). The entire thrust of the book depends upon this connection.

15. See Gal. 2:16.

16. *Ministries of Mercy*, p. 12. In general, there would seem to be a persistent tension between rhetorical effect and sound hermeneutics. For instance, Moises Silva suggests that '... much allegorical exposition arises from the need for rhetorical effect ... to the extent that the congregation learns thereby to look for "hidden" meanings in the text, to that extent the text is either subjected to greater distortions or else is removed from the common believer who is unable to produce exegetical surprises' (Moises Silva, 'Towards a Definition of Allegory', in *Has the Church Misread the Bible?* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999], p. 56).

17. *Prodigal God*, pp. 36–37.

18. In keeping with the theme established from the introduction and the first two parables in Luke 15, one might argue that the more natural reading is that only one of the two sons was lost.

19. *Prodigal God*, p. 37. Keller actually phrases things slightly more carefully when he is not directly interpreting this text: 'You can reject God by rejecting his law and living any way you see fit. And you can reject God by embracing and obeying God's law so as to earn your salvation' (*Center Church*, p. 63; italics added).

20. *Ministries of Mercy*, pp. 52, 53 (italics added).

21. Keller elsewhere marshals texts—Luke 17:20–21 shows that the kingdom is already present and John 3:5 emphasizes that the kingdom is entered now through the new birth—but does not sufficiently address the all-important question of how 'the kingdom' is to be defined in these texts. See also chapter 4.