

Book Review

The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith

Tim Keller

(New York: Dutton, 2008) 140 pages

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In the midst of emerging theologies and efforts to expand the boundaries of Christian orthodoxy, there is a great need for wise, reasoned, and creative retellings of the gospel message. Compounded with a move toward a so-called “generous orthodoxy” is the barrage of information that church-goers and seekers confront through music, television, and the Internet. Furthermore, everyone can have a voice with little to no boundaries upon what people can claim as truth—if truth really exists.

The recent release of Rob Bell’s book, *Love Wins*, gives a window into the confusion that can arise when prominent pastors question long-held Orthodox beliefs. While Bell’s book succeeds on some levels, especially in his generous use of the book currently being reviewed, it felt more like a personal exhibition than a necessary book for the edification of readers.

In the midst of this cultural malaise of misinformation and spiraling skepticism, Tim Keller is a great man for the times. He represents what this generation needs—the merging of a brilliant theologian and biblical scholar with experience and the heart of a seasoned pastor. Over 20 years ago, Keller left his pastoral position in Hopewell, Virginia to do what his Presbyterian colleagues told him could not be done—plant a church that reaches young adults in the middle of New York City. Keller did not

listen to the naysayers and set out to plant Redeemer Presbyterian. He went to coffee shops and engaged young adults on the topics of God, faith, and the church. With time, he grasped the hearts and minds of many young people in the city.

Redeemer Presbyterian, which he planted in 1989, now has over 6,000 members. Keller’s first book, *The Reason for God*, published in early 2008, proved that Keller not only grasped the minds of New Yorkers, but the minds of an emerging generation. With *The Prodigal God*, published in late 2008, Keller solidifies himself as much more than a great mind; he is a man who has deeply meditated upon the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. With humble awareness and keen insight, Keller retells the essentials of the Christian faith through what is perhaps Jesus’ most well-known parable, commonly called the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32).

In the Introduction, Keller writes of his personal response to a sermon on this parable by Edmund Clowney, his mentor at Westminster Theological Seminary: “I almost felt I had discovered the secret heart of Christianity.”¹ One could say something similar about Keller’s book. Often, one’s expressions of Christianity are affected by personal experiences, positive or negative, and can contribute to missing the beautiful and obvious truths. The title of Keller’s

book is provocative, but not for the sake of being provocative. For the longest time, the word “prodigal” was attributed to the sins of the younger runaway son, but the word actually describes one who is recklessly extravagant. The original definition of the word was neither positive nor negative. It could also mean exceedingly generous. Through a simple definition, Keller helps the reader relearn a basic concept: God is the Prodigal One. He recklessly and extravagantly poured out grace upon His people; yet, as Keller makes clear, people who claim to be closest to God often do not have any real understanding of God’s prodigal nature.

Honing in on Luke’s introduction to three of Jesus’ parables (Luke 15:1-2), Keller correctly identifies the “tax collectors and sinners” with the younger brother and the “Pharisees and teachers of the law” with the elder brother. Keller spends little time dealing with the historic focus of the parable, the younger brother; he focuses most of the book on the elder brother, following Luke’s intent in his introduction to the three parables. Jesus tells these parables in response to the Scribes’ and Pharisees’ grumbling about how He welcomes sinners and eats with them (v. 2). In this way, Jesus’ primary intent is to speak to the elder brothers of this world, the religious ones.

According to Keller, Jesus redefines sin, lostness, and the very nature of what it means to be saved through this parable. Neither the younger brother’s path of self-discovery nor the elder brother’s path of moral conformity lead to true salvation. Both perspectives are completely based in the human self. Sin is not breaking rules, but trying to put one’s self in the place of God. Those who are lost are not necessarily those outside the walls of a church, but those who, like the younger brother, flee in rebellion or,

like the elder brother, believe their slavish obedience makes them holy. One can only be truly found through acceptance of the unmerited and utterly extravagant love of the Father made radically available through the person of Jesus Christ.

Here Keller is truly masterful in his biblical exposition. He asks readers why Jesus’ parable would end without answering the question of whether or not the elder brother ever went into the feast. The reason is because Jesus was and is the true elder brother. Blinded by religion and a sense of moral superiority, the Scribes and Pharisees could not be loving, grace-filled elder brothers; furthermore, the deeper problem is that they would try to fill a role only Jesus could fill. Both the younger brothers and the elder brothers of this world are in desperate need of the true elder brother, Jesus Christ, who came to bring the human race home. This home is not some far off distant place, but this world set free from chaos, death, and sin. When one is welcomed home, like in Jesus’ parable, there will be a great and lavish feast. One cannot earn his or her way into this feast, but rather a person must have a place cleared by the true elder brother as the extravagant love of the Father extends a welcome. The only question is, “Can people give up their own way for His way?”

Keller’s book succeeds on many levels, as profound biblical exposition, as a social critique of church people and those who disdain churches, as a heart-felt homily to skeptics and the devout, and as a deep exploration of Keller’s own love for this powerful parable.

As Keller argues, this parable serves as a microcosm of the gospel and of the entirety of Scripture itself. In this way, Keller’s book is not only profound biblical theology, but also an extraordinary example of systematic theology.

I readily suggest this book to the skeptic, the seeker, and the committed Christian. It is extremely approachable, while still having profound biblical depth. Personally, it pushed me to reconsider not only my previous approach to this particular parable, but also my overall approach to the

Christian faith. I give Keller's book, *The Prodigal God*, my highest recommendation and include it on my short list of books everyone needs to read, especially those who think they are saved by their religious activities.

¹Tim Keller, *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (New York: Dutton, 2008), xiii.