

# **An Assessment of and Response to Tim Keller's Theology of the City**

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## **Introduction:**

*The city is humanity's most enduring symbol of power. States and empires rise and fall, armies conquer and collapse, ideologies come and go, but the world's great cities endure. (Cited in Harm De Blij, *The Power of Place*, 128.)*

Without question the major cities of the world in the 21<sup>st</sup> century represent a significant portion of the population God has called believers to evangelize. Population experts tell us that in 1800 less than 3% of the world's total population at the time lived in cities/towns of more than 5,000 people. Two centuries later that statistic has changed dramatically. Now, well over 50% of the world's population lives in urban settings. While urbanologists argue over exactly what qualifies as an urban center, there can be no doubt that the world has become a place dominated by cities. In fact, some argue that certain cities exercise as much or more global influence as do the government of entire countries. In some cases the population of a few mega-cities rivals that of some countries.

In some countries, unusually large percentages of the population dwell in cities and are urbanized. For example, over 90% of Japan's population reportedly dwells in urban centers. China with all of her vast land expanse reports a full 37% of her total population lives in her cities.

While one might quarrel with these statistics, one can't deny the urban centers of our world represent an important strategic opportunity for the spread of the Gospel. To be sure, the interconnectedness as a result of global urbanization presents a host of opportunities as well as challenges. One of the great opportunities urbanized centers afford believers is the rapid, global diffusion of Christianity throughout a culture or cultures.

Tim Keller loves the cities and more importantly, the people who live in them. His writing, his preaching, and especially his life portray this love as one born out of a deep desire to see people and the cities in which they live transformed by the power of the Gospel and redeemed to reflect the values and goals of the Gospel. And he is passionate to spread this burden to others.

There is much that we can and should learn from Tim Keller's deep burden for and lengthy ministry to both the people of Manhattan and the city of New York itself. There are many things in his approach that are to be commended. There are also a few areas in his theological approach to the city that merit closer examination in light of the implications they have on a biblical understanding of the social implications of the Gospel as well as the nature and role of the Church to whom the Gospel was entrusted.

It is my hope that this assessment will reflect both an appropriate appreciation for what is commendable and a fair and charitable assessment of a few areas in his theology of the city that perhaps need to be evaluated more closely in light of the trajectory of the New Testament teaching about the objective of the gospel on the fallen culture as well as the explicit New Testament teaching related to the purpose and role of the Church within a fallen culture especially when that culture is shaped in and dispersed by the cities in which that culture exists.

## **I. The Nature and Limitation of this Assessment**

This assessment is at the same time helped and limited by my lack of personal knowledge and direct interaction with Tim Keller. I have never met him personally nor have I ever had the privilege of engaging in direct conversation with him. This poses an immediate limitation not on the accuracy of this assessment but on its scope. For example, a statement made in the heat of preaching might lead to an incomplete assessment of Tim's position that a fuller, more in-depth conversational exchange might clarify or nuance in some important way.

On the other hand, a broad sampling of his preaching and even more importantly, reading what he has written specifically on his theology of the city does provide an accurate and objective base for a dispassionate and fair evaluation of his stated position and belief in this area. It may not be all that he believes about this but it is at least what he believes.

Furthermore, this assessment and response is oriented to examining the theological foundations of Tim Keller's thinking about the city and not necessarily the practical ways in which he suggests a city might be impacted and reached with the Gospel. I do acknowledge that the theological foundation of a position certainly does have implications on the way that position is applied and implemented. However, as much as possible, this assessment will be primarily oriented to evaluating the theological side of his thinking about the theology of the city.

## **II. The Man Behind the Message**

Tim Keller's biographical information is readily available at several websites. One of the more helpful is the entry under his name at the popular electronic encyclopedia, Wikipedia ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim\\_Keller](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tim_Keller)).

He was born and raised in Lehigh Valley, Pennsylvania in 1950. He graduated from Bucknell University in 1972 and went on to earn an M.Div. degree at Gordon-Conwell in 1975 and a D.Min. from Westminster Theological Seminary in 1981. He is ordained in the PCA denomination and for a time served as the denomination's director of church planting.

In 1989, Keller was asked to start Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City. From very small beginnings (about 50 attenders) the church grew to a congregation of over 5,000 people in 2008. Keller's influence and that of Redeemer have been noted in many major Evangelical publications. His success in reaching a city notoriously hard to the Gospel has attracted a steady stream of pastors and church planters to his doorstep.

Keller is a dynamic and engaging speaker. I have found myself, even when disagreeing with him, captivated by his communicative process. He speaks clearly, thoughtfully, and passionately. Perhaps even more impacting to those who do not regularly sit under his ministry are the books and articles he has written on a variety of topics. His best known work is his recent best seller *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. He has another book in the making entitled *The Prodigal God: Christianity Redefined Through the Parable of the Prodigal Sons*. Additionally he contributed a chapter in *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World* edited by John Piper and Justin Taylor. Two earlier contributions are worthy of mention – his chapter in *Worship by the Book* edited by D.A. Carson in 2002 and his chapter in *It Was Good: making Art to the Glory of God* edited by N. Bustard in 2002.

In addition to his published writing there are literally scores of short articles that he has written and posted on his website.

### III. An Overview of His Theology of the City

Perhaps the best starting point in grasping Keller's theology of the city is to begin with the vision statement developed by and for Redeemer Presbyterian Church.

***The Redeemer Vision:*** *To spread the gospel, first through ourselves and then through the city by word, deed, and community; To bring about personal changes, social healing, and cultural renewal through a movement of churches and ministries that change New York City and through it, the world.*

Keller's vision for Redeemer and his theology of the city come out of a specific theological context. As best as I can tell, Keller embraces a thoroughly Reformed soteriology, a Covenant hermeneutic, practices Paedo-baptism, and has what appears to be an Amillennial eschatology.

Keller is committed to orthodox theology when it comes to the inspiration of Scripture, the nature and components of the gospel, salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, the nature of man, sin, eternal damnation in hell, etc. In short, for the most part, the major components of Keller's theology seem to line up with the orthodox expression of those doctrines. This would seem to be borne out by his joint partnership with D. A. Carson in authoring a document entitled "The Gospel Coalition: Foundational Documents" in which Carson wrote the confessional statements and Keller wrote the theological vision for ministry from those confessional statements.

This is not to say that we are in full agreement with every point of Keller's theology or its expression. It is to say that Keller is well within the boundaries of theological orthodoxy as it has been expressed theologically by conservative theologians who are committed to a high view of Scripture.

So how does Keller's views about the gospel (which are orthodox) shape his general approach to culture and his particular theology of the city?

### ***Keller's General Approach to Culture in Light of the Gospel's Implications***

- A. He believes the gospel creates a community of people whose purpose goes beyond confronting the culture and preaching the gospel to sinners in that culture. Keller is adamantly and unapologetically committed to both the power of the gospel to save individuals from their sins and the purpose of the gospel to redeem the culture itself for Christ.

Here is how he expresses this dual focus:

*"We want to be a church that not only gives support to individual Christians in their personal walks with God, but one that also shapes them into the alternative society that God creates by His Word and Spirit." [This is the power of the gospel to redeem people from their sins]*

*"It is not enough that the church should counter the values of the dominant culture. We must be a counter-culture for the common good. We want to be radically distinct from the culture around us and yet, out of that distinct identity, we should sacrificially serve neighbors and even enemies, working for the flourishing of people, both here and now, and in eternity. We therefore do not see our corporate services as the primary connecting point with those outside. Rather, we expect to meet our neighbors as we work for their peace, security, and well being, loving them in word and deed. If we do this we will be "salt" and "light" in this world (sustaining and improving living conditions, showing the world the glory of God by our patterns of living; Matt. 5:13-16). As the Jewish exiles were called to love and work for the shalom of Babylon (Jer. 29:7), Christians too are God's people "in exile" (1 Peter 1:1; James 1:1). The citizens of God's city should be the best possible citizens of their earthly city (Jer 29:4-7). We are neither overly optimistic nor pessimistic about our cultural influence, for we know that as we walk in the steps of the One who laid down his life for his opponents, we will receive persecution even while having social impact (1 Peter 2:12)." [This is the purpose of the gospel to redeem culture itself for Christ] (Gospel Coalition Foundational Documents)*

- B. Further, Keller believes the Gospel involves a social component that demands Gospel deeds of believers as the means of transforming their surrounding culture. Gospel proclamation redeems men, Gospel deeds transforms culture.

*God created both soul and body, and the resurrection of Jesus shows that he is going to redeem both the spiritual and material. Therefore God is concerned not only for the salvation of souls but also for the relief of poverty, hunger, and injustice. The gospel opens our eyes to the fact that all our wealth (even wealth for which we worked hard) is ultimately an unmerited gift from God. Therefore the person who does not generously give away his or her wealth to others is not merely lacking in compassion, but is **unjust** [emphasis his]. Christ wins our salvation through losing, achieves power through weakness and service, and comes to wealth through giving all away. Those who receive his salvation are not the strong and accomplished but those who admit they are weak and*

*lost. We cannot look at the poor and the oppressed and callously call them to pull themselves out of their own difficulty. Jesus did not treat us this way. The gospel replaces superiority toward the poor with mercy and compassion. Christian churches must work for justice and peace in their neighborhoods through service even as they call individuals to conversion and the new birth. We must work for the eternal and common good and show our neighbors we love them sacrificially whether they believe as we do or not. Indifference to the poor and disadvantage means there has not been a true grasp of our salvation by sheer **grace** [emphasis his]. (Gospel Coalition Foundational Documents)*

He develops the implications of this even further in the following citation.

*In short, the purpose of redemption is not to help individuals escape the world, it is about the coming of God's kingdom to renew it. God's purpose is not only to save individuals, but also to make a new world based on justice, peace, and love, rather than on power, strife, and selfishness. If God is so committed to this that he suffered and died, surely Christians should also seek a society based on God's peace and love. (Redeemer Vision Paper #6 Christians and Culture)*

- C. And a primary way to bring about this transformation in people and in culture is through something he calls "mercy ministry." Here is how he explains this concept.

*Mercy ministry is working to alleviate the burden of another person, it is meeting their real or perceived needs through Gospel driven deeds. Mercy Ministry is kingdom ministry. It incorporates all of the effects of the coming of the kingdom of God and thus is a visual, viable representation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, through whom all things are redeemed, first partially in the old covenant, then really and more fully in the new covenant, and finally in the kingdom to come. (Biblical Mandate for Mercy Ministries)*

- D. And the best place to do these gospel deeds and proclaim the gospel message itself is in the cities of the world. Here is how Keller encourages believers and churches to do so:
1. Christians should move to and remain in the city. His idea is that "*if a far greater percentage of the people living in cities long-term were Christians, Christ's values would have a greater influence on the culture.*"
  2. Christians should be a dynamic counter-culture in the city. "*It will not be enough for Christians to simply live as individuals in the city. They must live as a particular kind of community. . . Christians are called to be an alternate city within every earthly city, an alternative human culture within every human culture, to show how sex, money, and power can be used in non-destructive ways; to show how classes and races who cannot get along outside of Christ can get along in him; and to show how it is possible to produce art that brings hope rather than despair or titillation.*"
  3. Christians should be radically committed to the good of the city they live in. "*It is insufficient for Christians to form a culture that only 'counters' the values of*

*the city. We must then turn, with all the resources of our faith and life, to sacrificially serve the good of the whole city, and especially the poor. Christians work for the peace, security, justice, and prosperity of their neighbors, loving them in word and deed, whether they believe what we do or not. In Jeremiah 29:7, the Jews were called not just to live in the city but to love it and work for it's 'shalom' – its economic, social, and spiritual flourishing.”*

4. Christians should be people who integrate their faith with their work. *“When most Christians enter a vocational field today, their either a) seal off their faith from their work and simply work like everyone else around them, or b) simply spout Bible verses at people to get their faith across. We simply do not know how to think out the implications of the Christian view of reality for the shape of everything we do in our professions. We do not know how to persuade people by showing them the faith-based, world-view roots of everyone’s work. We do not know how to attract people to Christianity by persuasively showing the resources of Christ for resolving baseline cultural problems and for fulfilling baseline cultural hopes.”*

### **Keller’s Biblical Theology of the City and its Implications for the Gospel**

It is important to understand that designating the city as the primary location for Gospel work is more than a pragmatic or strategically advantageous idea (though he concedes it is both). For Keller, concentrating Gospel-work in the city is a theological obligation based on God’s unique design and intent for human cities.

Keller builds his argument and develops his theology of the city with this objective – *“Reach the city to reach the culture . . . Reach the city to reach your region and the world . . . Reach the city to reach your own heart with the gospel.” (A Biblical Theology of the City)*

- A. Cities originated with God and were His invention and not that of sinful man as is commonly taught in Evangelical circles.

Keller argues that in essence the Garden of Eden constituted the first “city” and was intended to become a center of urbanization as Adam and Eve obeyed God’s command to multiply and fill the earth.

Furthermore, God’s people who started in a city intended by God will end up living in an actual city built by God (Revelation 21).

*“God’s purpose for humanity is urban! The city is God’s invention and design, not just a sociological phenomenon or invention of mankind.”*

*“The city is not to be regarded as an evil invention of ungodly fallen man . . . the ultimate goal set before humanity at the very beginning was that human culture should take city form. . . there should be an urban structuring of human historical existence . . . the cultural mandate given at creation was a mandate to build the city.”*

- B. Cities were designed by God to develop/transmit culture. They have a divinely given ability to do “culture making.”

Keller makes his case by pointing out that even the worst city (Babylon in Rev 18) had the power to draw out the creative power and culture shaping influence of its citizens.

*“In Revelation 18 we see that the city is a place of 1) music and the arts (v. 22a), 2) crafts and works of all arts and manufacturing (v. 22b), 3) trade and retailing (v. 23c), 4) technological advance (v. 23a), 5) family building (v. 23b). This is what the city was designed by God to do, as an instrument of glorifying him by ‘mining’ the riches of creation and building a God-honoring civilization. . .The city, then, has a powerful magnifying glass effect. Since God invented it as a ‘cultural mine’, it brings out whatever is in the human heart. Why? The density and therefore diversity of the city brings out the best (and the worst) in the human heart. How does it do so? The divinely given ability of the city to do culture making can be discerned at the most practical level by the urban resident. . . It is quite wrong to see the city as intrinsically evil. It was designed by God to draw out and to mine what God made. We should appreciate the power of the city and realize that the tremendous evil has been done to it by us!”*

- C. Cities are a place where people naturally seek God.

Keller points out that even in ancient pagan cultures, cities were built with a religious center. He contends that the ancients saw the city as the residence of their gods and that this is due to a twisted memory of the intent of the original city, Eden, as the place where God and Man met.

After Man was expelled from the first city into the wilderness, God gave him a temporary city in that wilderness. Israel was given a portable tabernacle and arranged as a traveling city whose dwellers lived with and fellowshiped with God.

And from these examples, Keller contends that modern cities also are divinely designed to be a place where people gather to seek gods or God.

His point is that when a city is dominated by inhabitants (dwellers) who are Christians, that Christianized city will shape and transport a Christianized culture. *“By year 300 AD, 50% of the urban populations of the Roman Empire were Christian, while over 90% of the countryside was still pagan. Because Christianity captured the cities, it eventually captured the society, as must always be the case. What captivates the cities also captivates the arts, media, scholarship, and the professions. Cities are the culture forming wombs of the society, made by God to be so.”*

Keller also points out that God created cities of refuge in Israel where people might flee to find God and safety.

D. Sin “broke” the city – not the city itself.

Since cities are inherently good and part of God’s initial design, the problem with cities is not their origin or divine intent but rather what has happened to them as urban centers. Because cities are a place of cultural diversity and populational density, sin uses this to create racism, classism, and violence.

Further, because cities are divinely designed to shape culture, when a city is divided by racism, classism, and violence it produces a culture of pride, arrogance, excess, overwork, and exhaustion.

*“Since the human heart is made in the image of God and is totally depraved, therefore the city brings out the very, very best and worst of human capabilities. Adam would have developed a city of God and all the potentialities of creation would have been untainted and thus the city would be glorious. Today, however, art and science and technology and education serve to both bring out the best and worst. . . . The purpose of the City of Rebellion [Babel] is to make a name for ourselves. This is still a deep drive and engine in the building of any human city. It is a spirituality of darkness of enormous force, it is a motivation moving many or most people who move toward the city.”*

E. The Gospel Fixes Everything! Reach the City with the Gospel and thereby change the Culture of the City and the World.

The way to change the fallen culture of the world is to impact large numbers of people who live in close proximity – i.e., the city. This will require gospel declaration and gospel deeds.

The preaching of the Gospel will serve to redeem people from their personal sins and the practice of the Gospel will transform the culture of the city in which those Christians live.

#### **IV. An Appreciation for Keller’s Theology of the City**

Of the many commendable aspects of Keller’s theology of the city, several are worth mentioning here.

A. Keller has a robust view of the transformational power of the Gospel.

Keller believes passionately in the Gospel’s inherent power to produce radical transformation. For Keller, a person who has truly understood and experienced the Gospel will be radically transformed both internally and externally. And he believes this passionately! This is a refreshing reminder that many of our churches would be well served to consider.

- B. Keller believes and promotes a Pauline strategy for Gospel dissemination.

Keller rightly observes that the divinely organized strategy for taking the Gospel to the world of Paul's day centered on the cities rather than on rural areas. This is a much needed reminder since until recently, in most cases conservative Evangelicals have all but abandoned the cities of the world.

Most of our missionary endeavor is not strategically targeted to the largest and most culturally significant cities of the world. Rather we direct energies to places where we perceive there is an existing interest in the gospel or to rural and tribal missions. Thankfully in the last quarter century this imbalance has been moderated by a resurgence of young missionaries desiring to go to reach the cities of the world by planting churches.

- C. Keller passionately insists that Christians live distinctly Christian lives within their culture.

In a day when many are calling for cultural integration that involves Christians moving toward the culture, Keller advocates, at least in theory, an approach that he hopes will bring culture toward the Christian. While we may object to his assessment of how this will ultimately work, we must applaud his insistence, at least in word, that believers live within the culture but as radically different from the culture in word and in deed.

As a further development, we would do well to be reminded that the gospel is a word that must be practiced but it produces a life of deeds that must be informed by the demands of the gospel and conformed to the life of the One who gave the Gospel.

- D. Keller insists that believers must share the Gospel with the lost.

Regardless of one's opinion of Keller's Reformed soteriology, it is refreshing to read his passionate insistence that Christians share a full-orbed gospel with lost people. Keller argues that believers must live within the culture of those lost people and win a hearing from them by living the gospel before them. This is a refreshing alternative to the seeker sensitive approach to evangelism that has dominated and shaped much of Evangelicalism for the last thirty years.

- E. Keller seems to attempt an engagement with culture that is grounded in theological orthodoxy and expressed in behavioral distinctiveness.

This seems to be a different approach from those who advocate a departure from or adjustment of theological orthodoxy in order to appease the culture as well as those who perhaps hold to an orthodox theology but have embraced a cultural liberality in an attempt to attract the culture. While it remains to be seen whether Keller and those who follow him can accomplish both objectives, it at least appears that he is making a legitimate attempt to be in but not of his culture. In other words, he has not dismissed the call to counter the culture in his attempt to reach it with the gospel.

## V. Some Concerns about Keller's Theology of the City

While there are commendable things in Keller's thinking about reaching the culture with the Gospel through the cities, there are also some serious concerns that merit further careful consideration.

### A. A Rejection of a Dispensational Hermeneutic

Keller adopts a hermeneutic whose replacement theology creates a significant difficulty if not impossibility of adopting a straightforward, normative interpretation to important segments of Divine Revelation.

To be clear, Keller is in line with most Covenant theologians whose views we might consider mistaken but we would not count them heretical.

His commitment to a Covenant theological approach to Scripture shapes much of his theology of the city.

As a committed Dispensationalist, I share his passion for the city and embrace his exhortation to go to the city, but I do not share the theological views of the city that he imports to certain texts.

It appears to me that he has allowed his passion and burden for the city to bring him to consider the Biblical text through the lens of the city rather than the city through the lens of the text.

Perhaps the greatest place his hermeneutic shapes his theological perspective is in his amillennialism. Keller seems to have embraced the traditional amillennial view that the kingdom is here in believers and we are to bring it in by transforming the culture and bringing about its social and cultural transformation by literally taking over its cultural centers and its seats of power.

I am not sure if Keller would recognize this about his view but throughout his writings he advocates that large numbers of believers need to move to the city in order to take it over by the sheer strength of their numbers. Obviously these Christians need to be doing Christianity – i.e., Gospel deeds. However, if the majority of people living in the key cultural centers were believers, the transformational impact of those believers on the culture would be astronomical.

Though he stops short of saying it, it does lead one to conclude that if we could just get enough Christians in the key cultural centers of the world we could win the world and transform it into the kingdom of God on earth.

## B. An Inconsistent Application of a Covenant Hermeneutic

Interestingly, if Keller truly adopts a Covenant hermeneutic he applies it somewhat selectively when it comes to passages that are key to his theological view of the city. For example, his theology of the city requires that he take certain portion of Revelation literally. Interestingly, some of the material in those sections are taken symbolically by most Covenant theologians. Many if not most Covenant interpreters see the city that Keller views as a literal city to be representative not of a city but of the Bride of Christ, the Church. Keller however, builds his theology of the city on this text as representing a literal city designed by God as the restored Eden. However, it appears that his willingness to take Revelation literally or normatively stops there given his amillennial approach to the rest of the book.

## C. A Misperception of God's Stated Plan for Earthly Culture

God's stated assessment regarding the future of human culture is that depravity would increase and evil men would become more wicked (2 Tim. 3:13). I am fairly confident that Keller would agree with Paul's statement about this. I am not sure how he would square this with his theology of the city in which he appears to believe that we can reverse this by Gospel proclamation and deed. The fact that culture is going to get worse not better seems to be the Pauline impetus for preaching the Word. Not because it will transform fallen culture and stop evil from progressing but because it will redeem wicked men and release them from that culture by making them citizens of a culture yet to appear when God's kingdom comes.

Keller does at time speak of the coming aspect of God's kingdom but it is unclear what exactly what form he understands this kingdom will take. Will it be Messiah's kingdom introduced after a time of judgment and purging by Messiah or will it arrive because God's servants have taken over the earth and transformed its culture shaping it into what Messiah desires? Keller's approach seems to put the responsibility for bringing in the kingdom and transforming the culture squarely on the shoulders of believers although he would certainly acknowledge they need God's empowerment and aid to bring this about. However, the biblical emphasis and obligation on believers is to share the gospel, not to bring in a kingdom. That is Messiah's privilege and prerogative alone.

Further, Keller's view seems to minimize the power of Satanic control and influence over fallen mankind (Ephsians 2:1-3). At times it appears that he almost believes by the sheer impact of the good deeds of believers the mind of fallen men can be awakened to embrace the gospel and its implications. I am almost positive that Keller's Reformed views would preclude him actually holding such a view but his emphasis on transforming the culture by the gospel of deeds even to those who do not believe seems unusually at odds with other of his theological beliefs such as total depravity.

Perhaps most significantly, Keller's views are difficult to square with God's stated plan for culture in the future. He is currently administrating a stewardship that will be fulfilled at the end of the age. Then, He will regather all things and properly arrange them under

Christ (Eph 1.10). If one takes Keller's theology of the city at face value, it is believers who are regathering all things and they are doing so now rather than at the end of the age. Furthermore, Peter seems to indicate that God will remake fallen culture through fire and judgment rather than reconstituting it through Gospel deeds (2 Peter 3:10-13). Only then in the new heaven and new earth will we see the pervasive righteousness that Keller seeks to produce through the power of Gospel deeds.

Finally, the timing of creation's release from the bondage imposed on her by God will be when His sons are revealed in their fully glorified bodies (Romans 8:22-23). This is not to say that good deeds are unimportant. But their function is not to redeem fallen culture. The immediate purpose of our gospel deeds is to point men to God by giving weight and credibility to the words of the gospel (James 1:26-27). The ultimate purpose of such deeds is to cause men to glorify God on the day of His visitation (1 Peter 2:11-12). The last theme in particular seems strangely absent from Keller's discussion, at least the portions that I have read.

#### D. A Misdirection of God's Expectations for Social Equity and Justice

Keller's theology of the city insists that God's people under both covenants direct their good deeds toward those outside the covenant community. In fact, Keller goes so far as to state that we are unjust when we fail to do this! However, a careful assessment of God's instruction regarding justice and social equity seems to be primarily weighted and directed within the covenant community rather than without. That is not to say that God approves of social inequity and injustice among any group of people. It is to say that God's primary concern as expressed in His stated expectations for His people is that social inequity and injustice be eradicated among His people. With very few exceptions, the OT texts addressing these issues instruct Israel to make these correctives within her borders. In the New Testament the overwhelming priority of the one another passages and the unity, equity, and justice passages are directed within the household of faith.

The possible exception to this might be the Lord's instructions in the gospels. However, Paul reminds us that until the Cross he was living under the Mosaic Covenant and his instructions if taken and applied in that particular context were to be taken and applied within the covenant community of Israel. Later, those men would found the New Testament church and much of that instruction would be reiterated in the epistles. To be sure believers are to live careful and blameless lives before unbelievers. However, there is an amazing paucity of texts supporting the idea that the goal of such blameless living is the redemption of the fallen culture itself, much less the present redemption and cultural transformation of the cities of this earth.

#### E. A Mistaken Assessment of the Nature and Role of the Church

An uncritical embracement of Keller's theology of the city puts at risk a biblical understanding of both the nature and the role of God's church. While Keller himself might speak and operate with a view of the Church that is faithful to the Biblical texts, those who read his views might end up with views that are at odds with the Biblical

description of God's design and intent for His Church. And when this happens, the centrality that God's gives to His church as the place where He meets with people and which is to be the pillar and ground of truth in the world might be transferred to the city. In reading Keller there were times where I felt his answer to cultural transformation was actually the city rather than the church. In fairness to Keller he does clarify along the way that the church should go to the city to transform the city.

Keller's approach sees the purpose of the church as displaying the good deeds of the gospel to the world in the city. However, Paul declares that God is doing something much greater. He is displaying his rich grace and multifaceted wisdom in celestial places (Eph 2:7; 3:10). And in neither case is the primary objective the transformation of the viewers. Rather it is the magnification and glorification of God by the display of His grace, wisdom and power. In fact, in at least one case (Eph 3:10) the audience is eternally hostile to God. They are the spiritual powers and authorities in high places that are identified later in the book as fallen angels (Eph 6:10-12). Again, this is not to argue that we should not live righteous lives before the world. It is rather to argue that the purpose of such living is stated in biblical texts to be the display of God's grace, wisdom, and power for His glory rather than for the transformation of fallen culture.

When the Church understands her primary mission and objective in terrestrial rather than celestial terms, she stands in danger along several fronts. First, she faces the subtle danger of replacing the true power of the Gospel (The Holy Spirit) with the community of the Gospel. What changes people anywhere is not the display of good deeds done by believers but rather the Spirit of God removing the blindness that Satan has imposed on them regarding their understanding of the true identity of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:6).

A second danger is the temptation to replace the content of the Gospel with the deeds of the gospel. To be clear, Keller does not make this mistake. He maintains a very clear and orthodox understanding and proclamation/presentation of the Gospel. Perhaps this concern is unwarranted. However, in an atmosphere where the Gospel of the grace of God has been replaced by many in the Emergent discussion with a gospel of deeds and with social activity, Keller's proposal must be constantly expressed in terms which disallow a replacement of the Gospel's content with the deeds that spring up as a consequence of gospel transformation. That experiment was called the social gospel and it was foisted on the church almost a century ago by theological Liberalism. And it was foisted on the church in the guise of contextualizing the gospel to a group of people living in a cultural context that despised the demands and implications of the Biblical Gospel. Those demands have not changed and neither has the fallen nature of lost men. Any gospel that makes deeds equal to content will soon lose the content and remain only with the deeds. And eventually the Christianity that such an approach produces will lose even the deeds and all that will be left is symbols and signs of a lifelong departed.

A final danger worth mentioning is that of living too much for this earth and too little for the one to come. If believers are to engage their energies and efforts in transforming the present earthly culture rather than living for a coming culture that God will bring to the earth after judging this fallen culture, they run the risk of falling in love with the fallen

parts of the culture they are attempting to redeem. It seems to me that John was addressing this very tendency when he instructed his readers to love not the world neither the things that are in the world. Parts of Keller's theology of the city seem to lead a believer to overly value a culture that God declared to be corrupt and promised to judge in the future. In what ways does Keller's theology of the city reflect seriously this coming judgment?

### **Conclusion: An Initial Response to Keller's Theology of the City**

- A. We must pursue the people who live in the cities for the sake of the gospel without loving the world in which they live.
- B. We must love the Gospel enough to proclaim it to the cities.
- C. We must love truth enough to suffer persecution from those in the cities.
- D. We must love Christ enough to be pilgrims and strangers among the cities of this fallen world.
- E. We must love God enough to engage in a whole-hearted, lifelong pursuit of the right city.

### ***Addendum: A consideration of the context of a primary text that shapes Keller's theology of the city.***

*<sup>ESV</sup> Jeremiah 29:7 But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.*

Without question Jeremiah 29:7 is one of the primary texts that shapes and orients Keller's theology of the city. In almost every published article in which he gives significant mention to his theology of the city, he appeals or references this text.

The basic idea is that we, like God's people in Jeremiah's day, are living in exile. And like those people in Jeremiah's day, we are to seek the welfare of the city for when we work for the welfare of the city in which we live, we are actually accomplishing the means by which God has ordained our own welfare.

*"Christians are to seek the earthy city as something to love and win. They are to win it by seeking its shalom (Jeremiah 29) and seeking to spread the city of God within it, and to battle the city of Satan within it." (A Biblical Theology of the City)*

*"Christians should be a community radically committed to the good of the city as a whole. It is insufficient for Christians to form a culture that only 'counters' the values of the city. We must then turn, with all the resources of our faith and life, to sacrificially serve the good of the whole city, and especially the poor. Christians work for the peace, security, justice, and prosperity of*

*their neighbors, loving them in word and deed, whether they believe what we do or not. In Jeremiah 29:7, the Jews were called not just to live in the city but to love it and work for its 'shalom' – its economic, social, and spiritual flourishing. Christians are, indeed, citizens of God's heavenly city. But the citizens of God's city are always the best possible citizens of their earthly city. They walk in the steps of the One who laid down his life for his opponents." (Redeemer Vision Paper #6 Christians and Culture)*

Let us acknowledge up front that Keller is right when he observes that citizens of God's city should be the best possible citizens of their earthly city. There are multiple texts in both testaments that exhort God's people to strive for this goal.

Further, let us also acknowledge that there are New Testament texts that instruct believers to pray for the well-being and welfare of the government under which they live, even if that government is comprised of pagan leaders (1 Tim 2:1-2).

However, Keller's use of Jeremiah 29:7 goes beyond praying for those in the government so that we may lead peaceful and quiet lives. He uses this text as biblical grounds for exhorting believers to actively engage all of the resources of "their faith and life" to sacrificially serve the good of the whole city.

The question is this: Is this the primary intent of Jeremiah's instruction to the exiled remnant in Babylon? Without question Jeremiah does instruct the exiles to seek the welfare of the city. And one of the primary reasons they are to seek the welfare of the city is to insure their own welfare. However, what exactly does the "seeking" Jeremiah talks about actually entail? Additionally, is there a redemptive objective to in seeking the welfare of the city beyond the preservation of exiled Judah?

First, it seems that Jeremiah explains what he means by "seeking" the welfare of the city in the next phrase, "pray to the Lord on its behalf." This seems to be an Old Testament antecedent to Paul's instruction to Timothy and his flock to pray for the government over them in order that they (believers) might live peaceful and quiet lives under that government. Obviously the welfare of the city in Jeremiah's day and the welfare of the government in Timothy's day were necessary components to a peaceful and quiet life.

Second, it seems that the objective of the prayer in Jeremiah's day is oriented more to the security, safety, and welfare of God's people than it is that of the city in which they dwell. In fact, two chapters earlier God reveals that this very city to which His people have been exiled will be judged and will serve many of the nations that currently are under its servitude (Jeremiah 27:6-7).

In fact, Jeremiah 27 and 28 provide an important historical and theological context for God's instruction to pray for the welfare of Babylon. In Jeremiah 27 God sends word through Jeremiah to the leaders of a group of kingdoms that have gathered to form a coalition with Judah against Babylon (Jeremiah 27:1-11). God declares that by His divine prerogative He has given all the lands to Nebuchadnezzar and has decreed that for a time, all the nations shall serve him. However, God also reveals that this will only be for a time. In fact, God declares that when Babylon's time to be judged come (in the days of Nebuchadnezzar's grandson), she will serve

these very nations that are about to be enslaved (Jeremiah 27:7). Furthermore, any nation that resists God's plan by fighting against Babylon will experience Divine retribution. Therefore, they should not listen to their diviners or prophets who prophesied falsely of peace and victory over the impending final assault of the Babylonian invasion (Jeremiah 27:8-10). In the final verses God affirms that His people and even the sacred vessels in His temple will be carried away to Babylon until the day He would restore them to Jerusalem (Jeremiah 27:21-22).

The next chapter opens with Hananiah the prophet declaring that God has given him a message that Babylon has been broken and after two years the temple treasures, that have already been taken as well as the exiled king and his court will all be returned to Jerusalem (Jeremiah 28:1-4). And his prophecy was very effective and caused many to believe in a lie. In fact, at the end of the chapter Jeremiah judges this false prophet for this very sin and predicts his death which took place in that very year (Jeremiah 28:15-17).

It is in this context against this backdrop that Jeremiah writes a letter to the exiles in Babylon who had doubtless been hearing the encouraging words that God purportedly declared about their impending release and restoration. Jeremiah sends word instructing these exiles to settle down for a lengthy 70 year stay in Babylon just as the Lord had originally predicted (Jeremiah 25:3-14; cf. v 12).

Instead of expecting to return to Jerusalem they should build houses and settle down in the land by growing food, making arrangements for the marriage of their children, growing families, and making sure that they increased numerically as a nation in the place of their exile (Jeremiah 27:5-6). And in order to lead this kind of life they were to pray that God would give peaceful conditions to the city where they were in exile (Jeremiah 29:7).

In other words, nothing in this text or in the instruction to seek the welfare of the city would indicate that they were to attempt to transform the city and rescue it from its pagan ways. Obviously God had plans to place people like Daniel in strategic places throughout the city and in many cases they were used by God to further the welfare of the city. However, the context clearly presents the goal of the welfare of the city in terms of preserving Israel for the day God would restore her to Jerusalem rather than the redemption or spiritual transformation of the city.