

THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled. (2 Corinthians 10:3-6)

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“Getting Sanctification Done”: The Primacy of Narrative in Tim Keller’s Exegetical Method by Timothy F. Kauffman

There is a person in the *avant-garde* Evangelical culture, whose name is a household name, whose books are ubiquitous on home, office and Christian retail bookshelves, who is quoted from the pulpit, in Sunday school classes, on church retreats, new membership classes, home Bible studies, small group fellowships and science and political think tanks. His books are promoted on the “top shelf” at Christian and secular booksellers, both “click” and “mortar.” This person, Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, PCA, in New York City, hardly needs an introduction. His ever-present, congenial, gregarious personality endears him to his listeners, whether on Vimeo™, YouTube™, iTunes™, or in the pews of New York. He is intelligent, well read and well studied, having received his Master of Divinity from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and his Doctor of Ministry from Westminster Theological Seminary. His ministry, Redeemer City to City - redeemercitytocity.com – is savvy, well organized, international and intercontinental, professional, and demonstrates a clear grasp of the media-rich mobile communication preferences of the now maturing digital generation.

In the last five years, he has released, among other books, *The Meaning of Marriage* (2008), *Prodigal God* (2008), *The Reason for God* (2008), *Counterfeit Gods* (2009), *Generous Justice* (2010), *Gospel in Life Study Guide* (2010), *King’s Cross* (2011), *Center Church* (2012), *Every Good Endeavor* (2012), *The Freedom of Self Forgetfulness* (2012), and most recently (at the time of this writing), *Galatians for You* (2013). His whitepapers are equally numerous: “The Centrality of the Gospel”

(2001), “Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople” (2009), and “What’s So Great About the PCA” (2010), to name a few. They are cited widely and authoritatively, and some congregations even model or shift their ministry, organization, focus, and operations based on his opinions. Tim Keller, to state the obvious, is simply an extremely influential personality on the evangelical stage.

This writer only very rarely encounters someone who does not know of him and has not read or heard at least some of his materials. When a personality becomes so pervasive, prevalent, and influential in the culture, it may be worth taking a second look at what the man is made of. What drives him, what motivates him? What is the framework through which he develops and delivers his message, and what, exactly, is the message?

These questions became more pressing to this writer over the last decades as Keller himself has turned into a veritable book factory, turning sermons into chapters, sermon series into books, and philosophical meanderings into position papers. These manifold works have been and still are recommended by friends and acquaintances because of their winsome tone and their intellectual acuity. They are truly cutting edge. Unfortunately, it does not take long to discover a pattern of exegetical license in Keller’s works, a license he affords to himself as the need may arise in order to support his prevailing narrative, whatever it may be. This pattern was especially odd because of Keller’s admonition to his hearers that we must “be true to the text, listening as carefully as we can to the meaning of the inspired author.”¹ As the examples in the following

¹ Keller, *Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople*, (2009), part 2, The BioLogos Foundation blog, posted March

3, 2012 <biologos.org/blog/series/creation-evolution-laypeople-series>.

section will show, his advice is more of a suggestion than a rule.

“What is Truth?” (John 18:38)

In *The Reason for God*, Keller explains that he is writing the book in order to show how he implemented a “moderate or conservative” church in a “liberal and edgy” city (xiii). With that in mind, it is easy to see why he cited *Matthew* 21:31 to his readers saying, “It was the Bible-believing religious establishment who put Jesus to death.”² There is some tangible benefit to casting the religious establishment of Jesus’ day as “Bible-believing” to his liberal and edgy readers. But the problem is that *Matthew* 21:32, the very next verse, declares that “the religious establishment” did not believe at all, and they certainly were not “Bible-believing” (see also, *John* 5:46). Was it the intent of the inspired author to portray the Pharisees as “Bible believing”? Of course not. The New Testament repeatedly portrays those who rejected Jesus as the unbelievers (*John* 8:45-46; *Romans* 3:3, 10:21, 11:20; *1 Timothy* 1:13; *1 Peter* 2:7-8). But the context of the passage and the consistent testimony of the New Testament was no barrier to Keller who needed a narrative for his book.

In *Prodigal God*,³ Keller wanted to show that the parable of the Prodigal Son contains “the secret heart of Christianity” (xiii), and adds this paradox for good measure: “one of the signs that you may not grasp the unique, radical nature of the gospel is that you are certain that you do” (xi). To underscore this theme, he uses *Matthew* 21:31 again to show that Jesus’ teaching attracted the irreligious while “offending the Bible-believing, religious people of his day” who “studied and obeyed the Scripture” (*Prodigal God*, 8, 15, 29-30). It hardly seems to matter to him that Jesus described His bride, not the Pharisees, as the obedient Bible-believers who “keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (*Revelation* 12:17, 14:12). The consistent testimony of the New Testament is that Jesus was rejected by those rife with disobedience and unbelief. But Keller needed a narrative to carry the message of the book, and the original context of the passage did not seem to matter.

In *Counterfeit Gods*,⁴ Keller’s objective is to show that we moderns are tempted by heart idols like “beauty, power, money and achievement” (xii). Indeed, we are. Keller uses *Ezekiel* 14:3a to suggest that the elders of Israel were struggling with heart idols, not physical idols,

and indeed were not even aware of, and could not see, any physical idols in their midst:

In *Ezekiel* 14:3, God says about the elders of Israel, ‘these men have set up their idols in their hearts.’ Like us, the elders must have responded to this charge, “Idols? What idols? I don’t see any idols.” God was saying that the human heart takes good things like a successful career, love, material possessions, even family, and turns them into ultimate things. (*Counterfeit Gods*, xiv)

But the second half of *Ezekiel* 14:3 states explicitly that their idols were in plain sight, “before their face.” The Israelites had not forsaken “the idols of Egypt” (20:8), and were offering incense to their idols “round about their altars, upon every high hill, in all the tops of the mountains, and under every green tree, and under every thick oak” (6:3). Who can possibly read *Ezekiel* and then have the elders of Israel saying “Idols? What idols? I don’t see any idols”? But this plain context of *Ezekiel* 14:3 was no constraint to Keller’s narrative. He was writing about heart idols, and it served his purpose to cast the elders of Israel as puzzled and ignorant, unaware that they were worshipping physical images.

In *The Meaning of Marriage*,⁵ Keller sought to apply the Scripture to the institution of marriage, promising to adhere to “a straightforward reading of Biblical texts” (16). But within four pages, Keller had already recast Paul’s words in *Ephesians* 5:32, “This is a profound mystery,” as if Paul was stating that the institution of marriage is the mystery:

[I]t is not surprising that the only phrase in Paul’s famous discourse on marriage in *Ephesians* 5 that many couples can relate to is verse 32... Sometimes you fall into bed, after a long, hard day of trying to understand each other, and you can only sigh, “This is all a profound mystery!” At times, your marriage seems to be an unsolvable puzzle, a maze in which you feel lost. (*Meaning of Marriage*, 21)

The context, however, is that Paul is explicitly referring to Christ’s affection for His church, and not to the legal union of the husband and wife. The reformers battled Rome on this very point, as Calvin shows, saying, “no man should understand him as speaking of marriage” in *Ephesians* 5:32, but rather that the “profound mystery” is

² *The Reason for God*, New York: Penguin Group (USA), Inc., 2008, 58-59.

³ *The Prodigal God*, New York: Penguin Group (USA), Inc., 2008, 8, 15, 29-30.

⁴ *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters*, New York: Penguin Group (USA), Inc., 2009, xiv.

⁵ *The Meaning of Marriage*, New York: Penguin Group (USA), Inc., 2011, 21.

“the spiritual union between Christ and the church.”⁶ But this was no constraint to Keller. When writing a book subtitled “Facing the Complexities of Commitment,” his overarching narrative needed a verse that made marriage the unsolved mystery, irrespective of the context.

We could go on and on with examples, for there are many. We could also spend considerable time showing that in spite of these lapses, Keller actually states many things that are true. That Christ is preached, we rejoice, and Keller on many occasions does so. But to understand just what latitude Keller allows himself, it is necessary to produce more than a passing sample of his license. Because Keller is one who is quick to dismiss the opinions of others because their opinions violate “authorial intent,”⁷ it is valuable to know whether he exhibits a reasonable duty of care when handling “authorial intent” himself.

What the Author is Trying to Say

The purpose of this article is to consider this issue by examining the self-revelation of Tim Keller through his works. It is no small task, as his writings are prolific. It would not be possible to review and evaluate them all here. There is, however, a very helpful and excellent summary of Tim Keller’s personal framework available from iTunesU™, and it contains the answer to the questions posed above. In 2008, iTunes released the audio of Tim Keller’s and Edmund Clowney’s (1917-2005) *Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World*,⁸ an 18-session course for instructing pastors on how to preach Christ “from every passage of the Bible” (Session 1: Introduction, 0:20-0:25).

Ed Clowney was a well-studied theologian, obtaining degrees from Wheaton College (1939, 1966), Westminster Theological Seminary (1942), Yale Divinity School (1944), and served as the first president of Westminster Theological Seminary from 1966 to 1984. He was a prolific writer as well, authoring many books on the topic of preaching, including *Preaching and Biblical Theology* (1961) and *Preaching Christ from all of Scripture* (2003). This writer had the privilege of meeting Clowney at the beginning of his two-year stay at Christ the King Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Houston, Texas. Dr. Clowney was a very kind and gentle teacher with a disarming, personable, and gregarious style of communication, both from the pulpit and face-to-face.

The series Keller and Clowney taught together is especially enjoyable to listen to, as they have an inviting,

conversational warmth in their teaching style, and the Question and Answer (Q&A) sessions are engaging, informative, and frequently jovial. Occasionally, the instructors deliver insightful quips and helpful instructions for pastors, such as Clowney’s advice to study the Scriptures for personal edification and not solely for the purpose of preaching: “Don’t let the pulpit drive you to the Word; let the Word drive you to the pulpit” (Session 4 Q&A, 21:05-14), or Keller’s admonition to honor the text when preaching: “Really find out what the author is trying to say” (Session 3 Q&A, 6:30-35). Because Keller learned his method from Clowney, it is helpful to hear them as they interact throughout the course in their respective roles of student and mentor; they do not always agree. There are keen insights from both of them, and the classroom venue provided a forum particularly conducive to unusual moments of candor.

The series is very helpful in the additional sense that it gets to the root of Keller’s exegetical methodology. It is an excellent resource for understanding his motives, and precisely what he means by honoring authorial intent, a discipline that, when practiced, avoids imposing one’s own beliefs on the text of Scripture. The course begins with a helpful emphasis on honoring authorial intent, and he repeatedly affirms it throughout the course, saying, for example, “See, we’re big on authorial intent” (Session 15 Q&A, 11:55-12:20). The many interactions with the class are also very enlightening, because several of the students, apparently skeptical of his method, asked the same questions that this writer would have.

What we find as we study Keller’s methodology is that “authorial intent” is gradually supplanted by his narrative, until we finally arrive at a point in the course where “authorial intent”—indeed the very text of Scripture itself—is replaced by speculation and fictional accounts that are consistent with his narrative, even if not with the text. Ultimately, the result is that the sanctification of Christ’s sheep is separated from truth, its effectual means, and there is simply no remaining connection between “authorial intent” and Keller’s use of the Scriptures to elicit a response from his audience.

Big Story Narrative Trumps Authorial Intent

In the series, the instructors began to back off from authorial intent almost immediately, and ended up applying it so loosely that by the end of the course, it simply had no meaning. The students in the class were apparently wary of the potential to be unfaithful to the

⁶ Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians*, Rev. William Pringle, translator, (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1854), 324-326.

⁷ Keller, *Creation, Evolution, and Christian Laypeople*, part 2.

⁸ Edmund Clowney and Tim Keller, *Preaching Christ in a Postmodern World*, Reformed Theological Seminary, September 2008, Session 9: Applying Christ: Getting Down to Earth Part II, 1:01:15-1:03:02, (iTunes U).

Word if they were required to “Preach Christ” from every text, precisely because that approach might make them guilty of “spiritualizing” every passage (Session 1 Q&A, 15:50-16:00). Clowney took this question head-on and provided a very revealing example:

It all depends on what you mean by spiritualizing. If you mean getting the clue on what the whole story’s about, and fitting these little stories into the big story, I don’t think that’s spiritualizing, I think that’s expounding. That’s telling us what it really is about. So I don’t see “finding Christ” as spiritualizing. Say you’re preaching from the book of Lamentations. How would you spiritualize that? You’ve got to look at the agony, you’ve got to hear the cry of dereliction. You have to hear ultimately the book of Lamentations as Christ’s cry from the cross. When you see that, when you hear that, is that spiritualizing? ... What is the cry? The cry to God is “Why, why?” And of course, that’s Christ’s cry on the cross. And that takes you into the depths of the book of Lamentations. (Session 1 Q&A, 16:15-17:45)

Our first cause for concern is that the entire book of *Lamentations* cannot be read as Christ’s cry from the cross for the very simple reason that the author confesses his rebellion (*Lamentations* 1:20) and acknowledges that God “hath broken my bones” (*Lamentations* 3:40). These are historical impossibilities. Jesus did not confess His “rebellion” from the cross, and Scripture rules out any possibility of Jesus’ bones being broken (*John* 19:36).

Immediately after this example from *Lamentations* Keller affirmed Clowney’s methodology: “With great confidence, I can say that is the subject of the course.” (Session 1 Q&A, 17:45-17:50). He continued, expanding on what the *Preaching Christ* course is fundamentally about:

One thing that Ed [Clowney] taught me is, if you actually go find the way the New Testament writers use the Old Testament, it’s pretty scary. For example, the New Testament writers, the Hebrews writer and the New Testament Gospel writers, they’ll quote Psalms, they’ll just take a Psalm and they’ll say, “As Jesus said, as the Son said....” You go back to the Psalm, and you look at the Psalm, and you look high and low for some Messianic reference. Is this a Royal Psalm? No. No. They can quote anything, any part, any nook or cranny of the Psalter, and say this is about Christ, or even this is Christ’s prayer, or this is about Christ.... [Ed taught me], “You know, if you really look at how the New Testament writers use the Old

Testament you’re going to have to come to the conclusion that there are 150 Messianic Psalms.” Now the thing that makes us nervous is, does that mean I can get anything out of anything? No.... But I just want you to realize that the New Testament writers read the Old Testament in such a Christocentric way it takes your breath away. And therefore, though there’s always a danger, we have to follow them I think. Ok? So the whole rest of the course is in some ways about that, too. (Session 1 Q&A:18:30-20:20)

For the same reasons mentioned above, we are not convinced for example, that *Psalms* 51 is Messianic, for David confesses his sins (*Psalms* 51:1-5) and cries, “Make me to hear joy and gladness; that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice” (*Psalms* 51:8). Christ did not confess his sins, and his bones were not and could not have been broken. These examples highlight the essence of Keller’s error, for he reaffirms Clowney’s position, saying: “Unless you’re expounding every text is about Jesus, you’re changing the meaning of the Bible for the people” (Session 1: Introduction, 19:00-19:10). Calvin, when expounding *Psalms* 72, objected strenuously to this approach, complaining that we do “violence” to the text and to the testimony of the Church when we approach every verse “as if it were our purpose, sophisticatedly, to apply to Christ those things which do not directly refer to him.”⁹

We can see why Calvin objected, and how present the danger of the hermeneutic truly is—passages that cannot possibly be about Christ are said to be clearly about Him. This is not “spiritualizing,” Clowney assures us. It is “finding Christ.” In this surreal, Orwellian twist from the outset of the course, we are admonished that if we do not see *Lamentations* 3:40 and *Psalms* 51:8 as Christ’s cry from the cross, we are “changing the meaning” of the text.

Thus, from the beginning of the course, Keller’s approach reveals the underlying and grossly unhelpful hermeneutic which mandates that every “little story” must fit into a “big story” narrative predetermined by the expositor. The implications are quite dramatic. As we shall demonstrate, when the overarching narrative is brought to the text by the expositor, it ends up clouding, cloaking and obscuring it, diminishing its context and changing its meaning. By approaching the Scripture in this way, the real meaning of every passage can ostensibly be known without reading it—for the preacher already knows in advance what it means—all that remains is to fit it into his narrative. The result is that one can preach the Scriptures to the ends of the Earth, all the while withholding their message from Christ’s sheep. It is actually a complete rejection of

⁹ *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Volume 10: *Psalms, Part III*, translated by John King, [1847-1850], at sacred-texts.com.

“authorial intent,” even while making earnest affirmations of it, and reduces the Scriptures to a collection of words that can be shuffled, truncated, expanded and embellished to fit any preferred meaning.

Some Restraint Is in Order

Thankfully, one of the students who saw the danger of Clowney’s and Keller’s hermeneutic, pressed them on how it could be controlled. The student objected, saying:

What I’m still struggling with, and I had this course with Dr. Clowney, with the two of you, a couple years ago, and it has really been a wonderful opportunity to study and to preach a different way, but still...I’m looking at this question of controls. Because the New Testament authors interpreted the Old Testament in this way, they were interpreting it to *write* the Word of God. We are *preaching* the Word of God. That’s not the same. (Session 1 Q&A, 26:10-26:55, emphasis in the original)

To this, Keller responded, “You mean they were divinely inspired, and most of us aren’t. So you’re still concerned about the controls thing?” and then handed it off to Clowney. Dr. Clowney then made an attempt to explain the question of control to the partial satisfaction of the student who, nonetheless, had residual concerns about where the method could lead. Keller agreed: “I do think some restraint is in order. Some restraint is in order. Because the hearer out there at a certain point, even the more untutored hearer, is going to start to say ‘Wait a minute.’ And it may throw doubt in their mind on everything else you said” (Session 1 Q&A, 29:10).

This enlightening exchange continued for several more minutes and largely remained unresolved, for the question of controls came up again. In Session 10, Clowney had preached on *Luke 15*, the parable of the Prodigal Son. This is significant here because, as Keller acknowledges, Clowney’s approach to this parable fundamentally “changed the way I understood Christianity.”¹⁰ In the sermon, Clowney stated unequivocally that the parable teaches us that it was the older son’s responsibility to seek the prodigal, which is why the father in the parable does not initiate a search for the son. The same student responded by appealing to the text, and complained,

What I see is forcing into this story this idea that it was the older brother’s responsibility to seek the younger brother. There is nothing in Jesus’ telling of the story, of the father’s rebuke of the older son, there is nothing in the story itself exegetically that tells us

that that was what He was doing. (Session 10 Q&A: 14:05-14:40)

The student was quite right that “the older brother’s responsibility to seek the younger brother” is not in the parable. But Clowney insisted that the overarching narrative provided the basis from which to exegete it. Said Clowney, Jesus “is doing exactly what the Pharisees were not doing, and they’re criticizing Him for doing it. They’re criticizing Him for seeking, and seeking is the last thing they ever have on their minds, and they’re perfectly represented in the elder brother. I’m not ‘bringing that in’—that’s why Jesus told the story” (Session 10 Q&A: 15:15-15:45).¹¹

It takes very little effort to see that the ninety-nine sheep, the nine coins and the elder brother represent the Pharisees and scribes in the three parables of *Luke 15*. With the same level of exertion, one can see that the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the younger brother in all three represent the sinners and tax collectors. Then with only a modest additional effort, one can see that Jesus is represented by the shepherd, the woman, and the father, each in succession, each rejoicing that what was lost is found. It is ironic, then, that when Clowney was ostensibly teaching how to put Christ into every text, he manages first to take Him out of a text that is clearly about Him. Armed with his narrative, Clowney simply states that Jesus left Himself out of the last parable and inserted the Pharisees in His place:

Look at that older brother again. Why is he in the picture? ... What Jesus did in the third parable, He stepped out of it—He could have told it about Himself ...but see he stepped out of the parable and put in a Pharisee, put in an older brother. (Session 10 Q&A, 29:00)

Having removed Jesus from the parable, Clowney then instructs the hearer to put Jesus back into it in the Pharisee’s place: “You take out the cardboard figure of the Pharisee, and you let Jesus step in, and you see how the parable really works” (Session 10 Q&A, 29:10-29:20). It was by this means that Clowney concluded that the purpose of the parable was to show that it was the responsibility of the older brother to seek the younger. This is the triumph of narrative over the Scriptures. It was with no less irony, then, that in a later session, another student armed with an overarching “exile narrative” proposed that perhaps the intent of the parable was to show that “All the blessings that were Israel’s were given to the younger brother, because Israel refused to come in.” Keller reject-

scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you travel land and sea to win one proselyte, and when he is won, you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves.” – *Editor*.

¹⁰ Keller, *Prodigal God*, xiii

¹¹ This is controverted by Jesus in His pronouncement of woe on the Pharisees and Scribes in *Matthew 23:15*: “Woe to you,

ed the interpretation because he disagreed with the exile narrative, and Clowney joined in with this terse response: “I don’t think that’s in the parable” (Session 11 Q&A, 11:00-11:40). It is noteworthy that the instructors rejected one narrative because the text itself does not suggest it, but defended their own interpretation because the overarching narrative requires it, even though the text does not. This exchange was instructional indeed, because it showed that it was the narrative, and not the text, that was actually being expounded that day. This is how “big story narrative” can end up supplanting the text, a point that Clowney finally conceded in the next section.

Authorial Intent Can Be Disregarded

There followed from this point in the Q&A on the Prodigal Son the same discussion that apparently left the question previously unresolved in the mind of the student. The student begged to differ from the instructors’ “big story narrative”: “To what extent do you ask yourself the question, well ‘Did *Luke* think this?’ ... *What are the controls?*” (Session 11 Q&A, 12:54 -13:22, emphasis in the original).

Here, Clowney finally and very transparently relented, and in a moment of remarkable candor, acknowledged that in order to fit the “little story” into the “big story,” sometimes the preacher has to cast “authorial intent” aside—as long as the conclusion is consistent with the rest of the Scriptures:

You’re right, you’re right in appealing to the use of Lucan theology to see what Luke is drawing us to see in this passage. And maybe this is a case where I’m saying you can go outside of what Luke deliberately intended in terms of the whole canonical Scripture. (Session 11 Q&A, 13:25-14:00)

With this hermeneutic, we could say *John* 3:16 teaches that the stars were created on the fourth day (*Genesis* 1:16). Invalid though the inference may be, the conclusion is consistent with “the whole canonical Scripture.” What does it matter what *John* 3:16 actually says if the meaning we extract is consistent with that? That this flexible hermeneutic is Keller’s as well was indicated by his rendition of the story of Jairus in *Mark* 5:21-43. Jairus, the synagogue leader whose daughter is on the verge of death, has approached Jesus in faith and in abject helplessness: “My little daughter lieth at the point of death: I pray thee, come and lay thy hands on her, that she may be healed; and she shall live” (*Mark* 5:23). Due to a slight delay, Jairus then received the news that his daughter was already dead. Jesus’ instructions to him were simple and clear: “Be not afraid, only believe” (*Mark* 5:36).

The natural reading of the text is plain: Jairus ought to believe, and to set his fears aside, for nothing is impossible for Jesus Who is able to raise her up again. But that is not how Keller teaches about Jairus’ encounter with Christ. To Keller, Jesus’ plain meaning, while true, might be taken moralistically, so he says that the preacher needs to “put Jesus into” the story—a story that is *already* about trusting in Jesus—by taking Jairus out and putting Jesus back in in his place. In the process he introduces hopeless confusion to an otherwise plain text, and warns against the temptation to teach that we, too, must trust Jesus as Jairus did:

With that sermon yesterday from Mark 5...I tried to say that it’s easy even there to preach that sermon, like “you just have to trust Jesus, no matter what,” instead of putting Jesus into that, and looking at how this shows how He saves us, as well—that He himself had a prayer turned down, and He steps in as the true father. He really takes the father’s position, by saying “Honey, time to get up.” He shows Himself to be the true parent. The other parents can’t do a thing. He’s the true parent but it’s because he lost His Father on the cross.... You’ve got to put Jesus even into the New Testament. You’ve got to be careful that you’re not preaching a pedagogic sermon. Ed Clowney showed me that years ago with the Parable of the Prodigal Son. (Session 10 Q&A, 2:20-3:35)

By way of contrast, we note that Keller’s nuanced approach was lost on Augustine and Calvin. Expounding this text, Augustine wrote simply that Jesus “did not find fault with him on the ground of his want of belief, but really encouraged him to a yet stronger faith” (Augustine, *Harmony of the Gospels*, Book II:28:66). So with Calvin: “By this expression, *only believe*, he...exhorts him to enlarge his heart with confidence, because there is no room to fear that his faith will be more extensive than the boundless power of God” (Calvin, *Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke* - Volume 1, *Mark* 5:36). They were hardly infallible, but it is difficult to find fault with their exegesis, as it follows the text plainly.

Contrasted with these two, Keller’s exegetical method is frankly alarming. The text says nothing of Jesus stepping in to show Himself as the “true father.” In Matthew’s and Luke’s *Gospels*, and in very similar circumstances, Jesus elevated the faith of the Roman Centurion (*Matthew* 8:10; *Luke* 7:9) perchance that the Jews might imitate it: “I have not found so great faith, no, not in Israel.” Should we not rejoice that a leader of the Synagogue has found the same faith as the Roman Centurion? Should we not be pleased to imitate them both, whom Jesus made models of faith? Nay! Keller warns that someone might respond with “faith alone,” but do so legalistically. This is driven by

Keller's conviction that every verse of Scripture must be fit into his broader narrative—that the “little story” must be force-fitted into “the big story”—irrespective of what the text actually says. Of Jesus' command to Jairus to “only believe,” Keller says, “Jesus' own examples and teaching have to be put into the big picture or you're preaching moralistically” (Session 4: Applying Christ, Part I, 41:40-41:50). As can be seen in his exposition above, this method can actually cloak the meaning of the text and shroud it in confusing allegory. Jesus was simply living out the Savior's role, healing the sick, curing the blind, cleansing the lepers and raising the dead (*Matthew* 11:5; *Luke* 7:22), and Jairus was invited to believe just as the Roman Centurion had. This is lost when embellishment and speculative interpolation are considered valid and necessary means of instruction.

Thankfully, one student in the class objected, saying that we cannot forget that it is God's work, not the preacher's, to open the heart of the hearer—that the preacher can preach the truth, but if God has not opened the heart, the hearer will not understand. There is simply no need to embellish. The student implored Keller to just keep to the text and trust the work of God: “Tell the story about grace. It's not even a story of moralism” (Session 4 Q&A, 12:00-12:40). At this point, Keller backed down momentarily, saying, “You're right, you're absolutely right. In fact there is no doubt that you can say absolutely everything right, and if the Holy Spirit is not working on their heart, they're going to hear it [moralistically]” (Session 4 Q&A, 12:40-12:55). But within two minutes, he returned to his theme: “it doesn't mean that you don't work like crazy to be understood and dismantle the grid” through which the listener may be hearing the message (Session 4 Q&A, 14:25-14:45). But as we shall see, “working like crazy to dismantle the grid,” requires embellishment of the text and occasionally even omitting it.

The Text Can Be Embellished with Speculation

This tendency to recast the text to fit the narrative is part and parcel of the hermeneutic taught in the course. So comfortable was Clowney with the preeminence of the story over the text itself, that he actually recommended that on some occasions, when preaching a familiar text, it is better just to tell the story based on the text rather than to read it. This, he said, will make it “more vivid” than reading the text word-for-word. So remarkable is the exchange between Dr. Clowney and the student that we reproduce it here as it unfolded in the class:

Narrator: “In this brief Q&A portion of Session 7, Dr. Ed Clowney kicks off the discussion with his thoughts on reading the Scripture *verbatim*, vs. telling a story of the Scriptures, and which is more effective.”

Student: “Dr. Clowney, I want to ask you, for example, let's say you were preaching part of the Old Testament yearly. Would you be open to just telling the story, instead of actually reading it word-for-word? Have you ever done that?”

Clowney: “Oh yeah.”

Student: “And I'm talking about [unintelligible]. Topical sermon.”

Clowney: “Yeah.”

Student: “Tell it.”

Clowney: “Oh sure. It's always one option I always consider.”

Student: “And *not* reading it word-for-word.”

Clowney: “It depends on the length of the story, see. And it depends, too, really on the whole structure of worship and all that. If you read the Bible right before you preach, that can be part of your sermon, in a sense. And I've often found that it helps to, well, when I was preaching on the Joseph story, ‘From Pit to Palace,’ I actually read [*Exodus*] chapter 37. I read that. So you can put a piece of the story before the people, and tell the rest of it. Length means a lot there. Sometimes the story is very familiar, and it does not need much to be read. It just needs to be understood better. But you can still retell it, retell it in a way that is more vivid.” (Session 7 Q&A, 0:00-1:50, emphasis in original).

This is a remarkable acknowledgement that his method can use, but does not require, the actual text of Scripture, because storytelling would make it “more vivid.” By way of example, we note that Clowney made the familiar parable of the Prodigal Son “more vivid” through this method. He attached considerable exegetical significance to the physical layout of the father's estate—noting the symmetrical beauty of the parable by the fact that the father went down the same path twice, once to greet the prodigal, and a second time to implore the elder brother. His story also emphasized the fact of the elder brother's advance knowledge of the cause of festivities even before he “asked what these things meant” in *Luke* 15:26 (Session 10: Expounding Christ Part V, The Parable of the Prodigal Son, 22:20-55). The attentive reader will note, however, that these are not facts at all, for the Parable says nothing of them. But apparently, the text must never get in the way of a good story, and if fiction and speculation can make the parable “more vivid” to the hearer, what harm can come of it? The harm, of course, is that by this means the sheep are denied the present power

of the Word of God as their nourishment. The elect are to be called “by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe” (*1 Corinthians* 1:21), and what is both preached and believed is the Word of God (*Romans* 10:17). Stories about the elder brother’s advance knowledge of the cause of the festivities, or which path the father took to greet each son, do not make the parable “more vivid”—just less true.

In his day, B. B. Warfield saw this same abuse of the Parable, noting that men who add these details in order to embellish the words of Christ are actually rejecting Christ’s ministry of preaching:

Determined to get the Gospel out of the parable, they diligently go to work first to put it in.... The fact is that this commentator is rewriting the parable. He is not expounding the parable we have, but composing another parable, a different parable with different lessons. Our Lord, with His exquisitely nice adjustment of every detail of this parable to His purpose, we may be sure, has omitted nothing needed for the most poignant conveyance of the meaning He intended it to convey. That the expositor feels it necessary to insert all this merely proves that he is bent on making the parable teach something foreign to it as it stands.¹²

Indeed, Clowney was “bent on making the parable teach something” that the original does not contain. To his discordant mixture of truth, falsehood, and speculation, Clowney then added this questionable advice on how to “make it real” for the hearers by planting in their consciousness possible endings to the “story” that are not included in the Scriptures:

The way you could best cheat is say, “What do you suppose happened then? Well we don’t know, but perhaps, *et cetera*.” You’re not saying it’s the text, but you’re saying it really happened, that’s all. You can’t go on and on about that kind of stuff, and you certainly can’t build any doctrine on it. But just to suggest things. The only reason for suggesting is to make it real. It really did happen. We’re talking about history. It’s not fable or something. (Session 7 Q&A, 2:25-3:05)

In the next session, Keller acknowledged that he is comfortable using the same approach. One student had objected to the use of embellishment because the Scriptures should be sufficient as delivered to the saints. Keller, acknowledging the student’s reservations, nonetheless explained that fictional but plausible details can be added to the Scriptural narrative in order to enhance the message:

I’m concerned about the sufficiency of Scripture, my brother over here, you were saying, but there’s that one place where Hollywood dealt with Abraham and Isaac. At the end of the movie, *The Bible*, where you have George C. Scott playing Abraham, and he’s about to sacrifice his son. And they stick pretty close to the Biblical text, but at one point when Isaac realizes what he is doing—he’s all tied up and his father is getting out the knife—and Isaac looks up at Abraham and says, “Is there nothing He cannot ask of thee?” And Abraham just whispers, “Nothing.” And yeah, that’s not in the text, but it’s hard for me not to repeat that when I’m telling the story, because I think that was the point. (Session 8: Applying Christ Part III, Getting Down to Earth Part I, 28:15-29:00)

We take this brief opportunity to suggest that one way to “make it real” so it can “be understood better,” is to read and preach the text the way it is in the Bible, instead of trying to make it “more vivid” by substituting the preacher’s “storytelling” and plausible, but fictional conversations and outcomes for the actual content of Scripture. The clear and present danger is that the “more real” and “more vivid” version of the story may be consistent with the preacher’s narrative, but not consistent with the text. But the text as delivered was apparently not enough for Clowney and is not enough for Keller—a fact that becomes even more clear when, as we shall see in the next session, he determines that the Word of God gets in the way of a good narrative and therefore occasionally needs to be *omitted* for the sake of the sheep.

The Text Gets in the Way

We see that Keller’s apple did not fall far from Clowney’s tree when he continued his lecture on “Applying Christ.” “Preaching Christ from every text,” he explained, means that portions of the text that are inconsistent with that narrative need to be skipped over:

The book of Esther ends that they [the Jews] get the legal right to turn on all the people who were trying to kill them and just slaughter them and take their money. That’s another problem with preaching from ...Esther.... So if you’re really going to preach... Esther, you know what I’d do, in New York, I’d just never bring that out. I mean, people don’t come to church with their Bibles. They study the passage I print out in the text. So I’m just not going to bring that up. (Session 9: Applying Christ Part IV: Getting Down to Earth Part II, 1:01:15-1:03:02)

¹² Warfield, B. B., *The Savior of the World: Sermons preached in the Chapel of Princeton Theological Seminary*, “The

Prodigal Son,” (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913), 11-12.

After this lecture, Dave, a student in the class, requested clarification. Keller repeated his advice, explaining that sermons on the book of *Esther* do not really fit into his methodology, and therefore must to be kept to a minimum:

If I was going to preach *Esther*, I would probably take no more than three and probably two weeks. At least with my congregation it would be a real mistake [to go longer than that]. *And I'm not even sure the book breaks down very well...* [To do this] you would just read something. It couldn't be too long, Dave. But you still have to tell the whole story through the text. Choose a text in which you can tell the first half of the story and preach the sovereignty side of it. The second week, find a text that tells how the story resolves.... You're really going to tell the whole second part of the story through the text, rather than expound the text verse by verse and open the text up and the structure. (Session 9 Q&A, 1:40-2:25, emphasis added)

Keller believes, apparently, that there are extra-Scriptural truths that New Yorkers need to hear, and Scriptural truths that they were not meant, and do not need, to hear. The determining factor in deciding which truths to preach (those in the Bible vs. those outside the Bible) is clearly his narrative and not the text. If his sheep need to hear truths that the Scripture does not contain, he finds a way to work them in. If his sheep do not need to hear truths that the Scriptures do contain, he finds a way to work them out. Thus it is the narrative, not the Scripture that prevails—a methodology that caused no small concern to his students, as we see them continuing to push back against Keller's methodology.

The Text Is Confusing and Misleading

There was a growing and understandable concern among the students that they were being trained to starve the sheep of the Word of God. One student in the class expressed concern about the suggestion that *Esther* should be condensed into just two sermons, and perhaps even just one, and even then attended by only a fraction of the actual text. The student very justifiably asked, "Are we really giving our people the whole counsel of God?" (Session 9 Q&A, 15:25-15:30). If anyone still believes that Keller actually holds to any coherent definition of "authorial intent," his answer here should settle the matter. Keller does not believe that the original author intended *Esther* to be expounded over a ten-week period. To "expound the text verse-by-verse and open the text up" over more than two weeks introduces the danger of "misleading" the flock:

If you're into authorial intent, you have to ask yourself, "Did the author of the book of *Esther* expect

somebody to be taking ten weeks going through it verse-by-verse?" I doubt it. It depends on where your people are.... Some books are pretty tough to break out without maybe even misleading people. (Session 9 Q&A, 15:45-17:00)

Of course, when the Scripture *does* fit into Keller's narrative, he has no objections to verse-by-verse expositions. In fact, one year he spent "seven or eight weeks going through Matthew 26, 27, and 28 verse-by-verse" (Session 9 Q&A, 24:10-24:20). We are delighted that he did so, and pleased that the Passion of Christ is worthy of Keller's time—albeit in plain violation of his own view of "authorial intent," since Matthew, to borrow Keller's phraseology, probably never expected "somebody to be taking eight weeks going through it verse-by-verse." But when the Scripture does not fit into Keller's "big story" narrative, he is comfortable simply leaving it out either "to honor authorial intent," or to protect his uneducated and untrained congregation from passages of Scripture that might confuse them:

They don't have Bibles. Besides that, also non-Christians may not have Bibles. So we print it out [in the church bulletin]. And that works very, very well by the way. It also is a great way of keeping away from certain texts that you don't want them to see. That's true. I mean, I don't want them to be confused by some texts that I just don't have time in a sermon to get to. So I just stop right there and they don't keep [reading and ask,] "Wait a minute, what about this?" They don't ask me. (Session 13 Q&A, 9:10-9:33)

Clearly it is the narrative, and not the Word, which determines what Keller preaches. Notable, we think, is Keller's statement earlier in the course that his interpretations are never questioned by his flock because to them, "the whole Bible is opaque. They open it, nothing makes sense. 'It's all Greek to me,' they say. Therefore anything I say at all that clarifies it, I get very little flak on interpretation. The fact that I'm getting anything coherent out of the text at all just shocks them" (Session 4 Q&A, 5:00-5:30). We cannot imagine a more pitiable condition for his congregation than this, that they should be so ill-equipped and so vulnerable to Keller's devices. They are not Bereans and are not trained to be. There is an easy solution to this problem, of course, but it would require that the sheep be better instructed in the Word—something Keller thinks might be dangerous and misleading. Indeed it might be dangerous, but certainly not to them.

The Worship Is the Sanctification

If a pastor believed that sanctification of the sheep is by the truth (and the truth is the Word, *John* 17:17), we might find it inexcusable for such a one to be so invested in

shielding them from it. But in Keller's case, there is a rather simple explanation: Keller believes that sanctification is by faith through worship. His only obligation, then, is to get his sheep to adore Christ that they may be sanctified. If sanctification were by truth (and it is), the preacher's obligation would be to impart truth to the congregation, and truth is expressed in propositions—what Keller derides as “information.” But providing truth to the congregation is not his primary objective. The objective is to get the sheep to experience Christ through the text, irrespective of its meaning, as we have seen:

The aim of every sermon is for them to experience Christ through the text, so the hearers have a sense of God on their hearts.... You haven't fulfilled the text's purpose unless you bring people into the presence of God through Christ. And the alternative is giving information. (Session 1: Introduction, 5:00-5:28)

We humbly suggest that if the preacher leads people into the presence of God through speculation, fiction, embellishment, falsehood, and omission, then they have not been led into the presence of God, “for the Father seeketh” those who worship Him in spirit and in truth (*John* 4:23), not through speculative exegetical showmanship. Sanctification may occur when the sheep learn that the Medo-Persian empire extended as far as the Greek Isles (*Esther* 10:1-2), as well as when they learn that “the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom” (*Matthew* 27:51). Both statements are equally true without the preacher having to force Jesus into either one. But this is not how Keller sees sanctification. Through worship, he can “get sanctification done on the spot,” and “what we're after” is getting sanctification done:

I believe you can actually get sanctification done on the spot.... Because if the person is worshiping Christ in a deeper way right there, that's what you have to do.... Worship actually consumes the flesh.... As I am actually worshiping Christ, I am both humbled and built up.... As the sermon goes on, if I'm worshiping as I'm preaching, and the people are worshiping as I'm preaching, they're getting sanctification done on the spot. In other words, they will not actually be as angry when they leave. If they have been worshiping, they will find that things that irritated them before will not irritate them because those things are not as necessary as they were before. The worship *is* the sanctification. You're getting sanctification done on the spot in the sermon.... In the sermon you are making Christ glorious to their hearts at that moment. Jesus becomes the central thing at that moment during the sermon. They are actually being sanctified on the spot. The roots of the flesh are being withered in the light of the worship of Jesus. And that's what we're

after. (Session 9 Q&A, 6:45-8:30, 12:50-13:10, emphasis in original)

The way to get to sanctification, then, is to get the people to worship, and the way to get them to worship is to tell them that every text is about Christ. He states,

It's only as you show how the text reveals Christ that you're really giving people the “Oh, that's what it means.” ... It's when you show people that this text is really about Christ that you really move from lecture into worship. (Session 1: Introduction, 11:25-11:45)

God's children will be more effectively sanctified by a lecture on the tax Ahasuerus imposed on “the isles of the sea” (*Esther* 10:1) than they will be sanctified by worship based on the “facts” that Jesus cried “he hath broken my bones” from the cross and that Isaac asked a rather penetrating question of Abraham when he was about to go under the knife. Simply put, the former is in the Scripture and the latter are not, and sanctification is to be by the Scriptures, not by the embellishment, substitution, omission, and replacement thereof. As we have thus far demonstrated, showing people “that this (and every) text is really about Christ” is how Keller thinks sanctification gets done on the spot, and whether the text really is about Christ appears to be beside the point. When sanctification is separated from truth (as it clearly is in Keller's mind), then the logical end of his approach, as we shall see, is that sanctification can be accomplished through a lie...as long as the lie results in worship, through which sanctification can take place.

Sanctification by Incorrect Theology

Keller's methodology in the *Preaching Christ* series has led him to some interesting, if detrimental, practical applications. In one session, Keller related a rather touching, personal reflection based on a very moving event from *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. At this point in the story, a Hobbit joins Aowen's side in battle because, the Hobbit feels, a being so fair, so beautiful, should not die alone. Keller even agreed that his personal inferences here were incorrect from a theological standpoint. Nonetheless, he said, God had used that false theology in order to provide an incentive in his life toward good works—that is, to sanctify him:

Now I want you to know that that has been a very important way that God has worked in my life. When I see Jesus Christ dying on the cross, I feel like if He was willing to do that for me, if He was willing to stand up before these incredible giants of darkness, that for no other reason, then I just need to die with Him. I need to stand there with Him. If He's going to

do that for me, then I need to stand alongside of Him, even if I go under. I know that's not theologically right. That's not theologically correct. But there's something that said to me that if He was going to go to hell for me, and if all I could do is stand next to Him and go to hell with Him, I should. (Session 8 Q&A, 3:55-4:50)

To his credit, Keller insisted that his hearers not use his inferences from Aeowen's courage as a sermon illustration, and he is quite right that this is bad theology. Jesus did not come to Earth to find a band of likeminded brethren to perish with him. Instead, Jesus said that He "must... be rejected" (*Luke 17:25*), and "All ye shall be offended because of me this night: for it is written, I will smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered" (*Mark 14:27*). But there is a verse with some truth that Keller may wish to take on board: "For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth" (*1 Peter 2:21-22*).

We are indeed called to follow in His steps, "laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings"—something that the Spirit accomplishes through the God-given desire for "the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (*1 Peter 2:1-2*). That is how the Spirit "gets sanctification done."

Yet just as Keller claims that God uses error in his life for his personal sanctification, he also attempts to "get sanctification done" through the use of error in his sermons. He explicitly acknowledges this later in the course. For example, while Keller disagrees with some of C.S. Lewis' apologetics, he uses those arguments anyway because "it works on certain people":

Lewis in his sort of wonderful Arminian way, argues for hell as the price of freedom. He says hell is the greatest monument to human freedom there is. That if you really want to screw up your life royally and eternally, you have the power to do it. Some people actually like that. There are some people that are *that* radically committed to human freedom that I can use that, even though I kind of don't believe it. Because he's not reformed, there are things Lewis says that theologically I don't like, and yet I know it works on certain people, so I use it. (Session 13: Adoring Christ Part I, Getting inside their World Part II, 12:15-13:00, emphasis in original)

This quote from his "Adoring Christ" lecture is quite revealing, because it exposes the fleshly pragmatism of Keller's ministry, a pragmatism that leads him ultimately to conclude that sanctification is accomplished through

worship apart from truth. In other words, Christ's sheep can be sanctified by adoration whether they are led to adore Him by the truth or not. Truth apparently must bend to "narrative" when one takes on the monumental task of "getting sanctification done," especially if falsehood can get them to adore Christ more willingly.

Is God's Word the Message or Is It the Medium?

In the end, the answer to our questions about Keller's framework is that his definition of, or need to adhere to, "authorial intent" ebbs and flows like the tide and bends to his personal narrative. All of Scripture is like clay in the potter's hands—he shapes it to meet whatever objective he has at the time. Authorial intent allegedly militates against verse-by-verse exposition when it does not suit him, but verse-by-verse exposition is required when it does. Authorial intent ostensibly requires that some passages be skipped, but allows for fictional speculation to be interpolated when the Scripture has not sufficiently made its point. Clearly, authorial intent and Scripture itself are subordinate to Keller's narrative.

The danger to the sheep is palpable. Whereas the preacher's duty is to use his gifts and his personality as a platform for the delivery of the contents of Scripture, Keller instead uses the Scripture as a platform to deliver the contents of his own imagination. Where the Scriptures do not conform to it, they are either modified to suit the message, or omitted lest they get in the way of it. The Word is not the message—it is just the medium through which Keller delivers his. This results in confusion ("Jesus is the true parent because He lost His Father on the cross"), speculation ("because I think that was the point"), and outright falsehood ("Jesus was rejected by obedient Bible-believers"). If the Scripture, in Keller's mind, is confusing and misleading to the sheep, it is only because he himself has made it so. His own practices therefore lead us to be wary of his works, as he himself warned: "It may throw doubt in their mind on everything else you said." Indeed, it does. We are grateful for the testimony of some of Keller's students who repeatedly objected to his methods. But not all did. Unfortunately for those students, and their sheep, Keller's exegetical methodology is being spread to every corner of the world.

Nevertheless, his *Preaching Christ* series does provide a valuable opportunity to instruct the sheep to be wary of such devices—devices which are ever present in his works. When Paul left the flock at Ephesus, he commended them "to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified" (*Acts 20:32*). Christ, the head of the Church, has always entrusted the unity and purity of the Church to the Spirit and His undefiled, unembellished Word. We believe that is, and always will be,

enough, lest the church succumb to the constant temptation to derive its unity from one man's personality.

In closing, Calvin had some very stern warnings for those who were doing exactly what Keller is doing, and what Clowney did:

...the world always has and always will prefer speculations which seem ingenious, to solid doctrine.... For many centuries no man was thought clever who lacked the cunning and daring to transfigure with subtlety the sacred Word of God. This was undoubtedly a trick of Satan to impair the authority of Scripture and remove any true advantage out of the reading of it... Scripture, they say, is fertile and thus bears multiple meanings. I acknowledge that Scripture is the most rich and inexhaustible fount of all wisdom. But I deny that its fertility consists in the various meanings which anyone may fasten to it as his pleasure. Let us know, then, that the true meaning of Scripture is the natural and simple one, and let us embrace and hold it resolutely. Let us not merely neglect as doubtful, but boldly set aside as deadly corruptions, those pretended expositions which lead us away from the literal sense. (*Commentary on Galatians 4:22*)

Update on the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA)

The Standing Judicial Committee (SJC) of the PCA rendered its decision on the Complaint brought against the Pacific Northwest Presbytery's (PNW) ruling in the case against TE Peter Leithart. (Leithart was acquitted of all five charges of teaching the Federal Vision by the PNW.) The SJC's ruling was to deny the complaint. In its reasoning the SJC stated:

[O]ur review in this Case is constitutionally limited to the information developed in the Record dealing with this specific Case. *Thus, nothing in our Decision or reasoning should be understood as rendering any judgment on any "school of thought" within or without the PCA.* Our review could focus only on: (a) whether the Complainant demonstrated that the Presbytery committed procedural errors in its handling of this matter; (b) whether the Complainant demonstrated that Presbytery misunderstood TE Leithart's views; and (c) whether the Complainant demonstrated that TE Leithart's views are in conflict with the system of doctrine....

Finally, we reiterate that nothing in this Decision should be construed as addressing (or thereby endorsing) in general TE Leithart's views, writings, teachings or pronouncements. The Decision is based on the specific issues raised in the indictment and the Record of the Case as developed at the trial. Our conclusion is simply that neither the prosecution nor the Complainant proved TE Leithart's views, as articulated at the trial or otherwise contained in the Record of the Case, violate the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Standards. (Emphasis added.)

From the 722 page Record of the Case:

PROSECUTER: is this your view namely that the – the arrabon of the Holy Spirit, the down payment of future glory is given to all members of the visible church merely by being baptized and can be lost by those members of the visible church who later apostasize.

WITNESS [Leithart]: Yeah, I – I would say yes." (Leithart Trial Transcript, 190).

Q: Do you speak of, in your writings, temporary – temporary forgiveness of sins?

A: Yes.

Q: Does baptism confer justification and, if so, what do you mean by that?

A: Yeah. (Leithart Trial Transcript, 223).

You may draw your own conclusion as to whether or not the Record of the Case was consulted or not in the decision of the SJC. The Illiana Presbytery made an Overture to the GA to have the SJC rehear the Leithart case, part of which follows:

Whereas, the SJC did not determine whether the accused is guilty of holding and teaching views that are in conflict with the system of doctrine taught in the Westminster Standards, rendering judgment instead on whether the Complainant demonstrated such a conflict, thereby failing to fulfill its duty to interpret and apply the Constitution of the PCA according to its best abilities and understanding (BCO 39-4)...

Therefore, be it resolved that Illiana Presbytery hereby overtures the 41st General Assembly to direct the Standing Judicial Commission to rehear case 2012-05 (RE Gerald Hedman v. Pacific Northwest Presbytery) in accordance with the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America.