

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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Identity Politics as Theology: The Case of Princeton and Pastor Tim Keller

Princeton Theological Seminary has a rich heritage, often intertwined with the history of the United States. Founded about 1726 by William Tennent (then known as the Log College), it contributed to providing a real need for colonial Presbyterianism—college-educated ministers. In colonial America, most prospective pastors needed to study in Europe and then return to the colonies to serve. Over the next several decades of the 18th century, numerous connections developed between the Log College and the founding of the College of New Jersey, later known as Princeton University (and Seminary). Jonathan Edwards, arguably the greatest theologian America has ever produced, was slated to be Princeton's president, but died before he could assume the post. John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was an early president of Princeton. Witherspoon had a profound influence on James Madison, a Princeton graduate who was known as the “Father of the US Constitution.” Other significant theologians in Princeton's long history include Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield and Charles Hodge, among many others. But the Princeton of history is not the Princeton of today. This proposition is validated by Princeton's recent decision concerning Pastor Tim Keller, founder and pastor of the Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan. Keller's church now has a weekly attendance of about 5,000 and is especially appealing to young professionals. The church maintains conservative theological positions on the ordination of women and practicing LGBT individuals, while supporting a traditional, biblically-based view of marriage.

According to an announcement by Princeton president Craig Barnes on Wednesday, 22 March 2017, the mainline seminary reversed its decision to honor Tim Keller with a prize named for neo-Calvinist theologian Abraham Kuyper following the outcry over the Presbyterian Church of America (PCA) pastor's conservative positions. Earlier this year, Princeton announced that the New York City pastor would receive its 2017 Kuyper Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Witness. Its release called Keller “an innovative theologian and church leader” and a “catalyst for urban mission.” [According to the seminary, the award goes to “a scholar or community leader whose outstanding contribution to their chosen sphere reflects the ideas and values characteristic of the Neo-Calvinist vision of religious engagement in matters of social, political, and cultural significance in one or more of the ‘spheres’ of society.”] Kate Shellnutt of *Christianity Today* reports: “Because the PCA conflicts with the seminary's denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA), on women and LGBT clergy, leaders agreed not to award Keller the prize and thus affirm his differing stance. However, the school has still scheduled the Redeemer Presbyterian pastor to speak on mission at an annual conference hosted by its Kuyper Center for Public Theology in April.”

In recent weeks, several Princeton alumni voiced concerns that, as a PCA pastor, Keller's beliefs conflict with the seminary's embrace of "full inclusion for ordained leadership of the church." A *Christian Century* post described his belief in male headship as "baptized abuse" and "toxic theology." Indeed, Carol Howard Merritt stated, "we are honoring and celebrating a man who has championed toxic theology for decades." Therefore, President Barnes pulled the honor but invited Keller to still give the annual Kuyper Lecture on 6 April 2017. Keller has agreed to do so.

How should we think about this outrageous example of intolerance from a seminary that has a rich heritage but has now embraced not only theological liberalism, which denies the basic supernatural elements of biblical Christianity (e.g., the deity of Jesus, His literal resurrection, the inerrancy of Scripture, etc.), but has embraced what Case Thorp, Senior Pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Orlando, has called Identity Theology? Permit me a summary of Thorp's helpful observations:

1. Seminaries throughout the nation are embracing and elevating this radical identity theology, which is splitting not only the nation but also major denominations.
2. "Entire theologies have developed from one's self-orientation in an attempt to denounce patriarchy, sexism, racism and homophobia. Feminist theology and black-liberation theology produced womanist theology. Now queer theology asks in the words of Marcella Althaus-Reid, 'What can sexual stories from fetishism and sadomasochism tell us about our relationship with God, Jesus and Mary?' Identity theology breaks down the communal cohesion and deep unity that Jesus and the apostle Paul sought to establish."
3. Identity theology perpetuates the Enlightenment's failed promise in which true meaning rests within someone's understanding of himself. "Those who cling to this mode of thinking leave behind a God-centered study for a radical focus on humanity. That amounts to anthropology, not theology."
4. Most poignantly, Thorp concludes that "today's identity theology merely replaces northern European, male, cisgendered theology with another set of adjectives seeking to exercise power over others in the name of justice. But this is false justice, because it lacks the divine righteousness that gives meaning to all lesser forms of justice. Call it retribution theology, a form of tribalism at its worse."

Tim Keller is one of the most important pastors and theologians preaching and writing today. His church in lower Manhattan is in one of the most diverse places on earth—and he is reaching these folks with the Gospel. His book, *A Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, is one of the best written theologies for the lay person I know of. I have used it and have recommended it countless times. In many ways, Keller's writing and preaching reminds me of C.S. Lewis. It is outrageous that Princeton would renege on its initial commitment to honor Keller. Owen Strachan of the Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary is certainly correct

when he concludes that, “Those who promote tolerance in our time show little of it; those who call for charitable dialogue do so little to extend it. Biblical sexual ethics is where this take-no-prisoners battle is the fiercest.”

A concluding comment: Identity theology, which is really identity politics by another name, is sowing so much confusion in this nation and especially within the broader Christian community. It offers no real solutions, but only sows hurt, pain and sickening confusion among those who need hope and purpose for life. The solution is one offered in the New Testament. The key to identity is not politics or power; it is Jesus. About 242 times in the New Testament, the phrase “in Christ” (or “in Him”) is used. It summarizes the place of security, of purpose and of meaning for the person who has placed his or her faith in Jesus Christ. To be in Christ is to be a “new creation” (2 Corinthians 5:17). To be in Christ is to be in a sphere of love and security (Romans 8:31-39). To be in Christ is to be a joint heir with Jesus and to have the promise of a glorious future with Him (Galatians 3-4 and Romans 8). To be in Christ is to have a blessed hope that the grace of God will give you enablement for the present and hope for the future (Titus 2:11-14). To be in Christ offers completely and totally what “identity theology” promises but can never deliver—clarity of who I am and why I am important. Tim Keller has exhibited magnanimous grace and compassion through this tragic ordeal. He represents, to the glory of God, what Princeton Seminary used to represent. God will be glorified through this—and His glory will far outshine the tragic fall of one of America’s great seminaries: Oh how the mighty have fallen!

See Kate Shellnutt “Princeton Seminary Reforms Its Views on Honoring Tim Keller,” www.christianitytoday.com (22 March 2017); Case Thorp in the *Wall Street Journal* (24 March 2017); and David Gibson, www.religiousnews.com (22 March 2017).