How is it that a conservative Protestant, Bible-believing church consistently attracts close to 6,000 people to its services in the heart of Manhattan every Sunday? What explains the phenomenon of a church that proclaims “born-again religion” growing and thriving in one of the most liberal, secular, pluralistic, and cosmopolitan cities in the world? The general consensus in social science, after all, is that exclusivist religious beliefs and conservative theology are not amenable to affirmations of cultural pluralism and diversity. Yet, this multiracial congregation has figured out how to go with the grain of the city’s immense ethnic and cultural pluralism. The matter is even more intriguing when one considers that most of the attendees are young professionals and artists in their 20s and 30s, and not the anticipated elderly parishioners of a bygone era. Furthermore, as for the worship services, there is not the least hint of mega-church tactics, charismatic melodrama, or cutting-edge “emergent church” practices. In fact, the church at the heart of this puzzle, Redeemer Presbyterian, has a traditional feel with a simple ordered liturgy comprised of hymn singing, corporate prayer, scripture reading, and preaching. To top it all off, it seems that it is the 30 minute sermons of Redeemer’s 60 year old senior minister, Tim Keller, that are the church’s biggest draw.

While further research is needed to explain how Redeemer initially grew and how it continues to thrive in Manhattan, this essay seeks to explain a small part of the church’s attraction by reflecting on Keller’s preaching strategy—a central part of which is to make the monologic text of the Bible more palatable to his cosmopolitan hearers. Keller


2 The church considers itself multiethnic and multiracial with about 45 percent of its attendees being Asian, 45 percent being white, and 10 percent being of other races and ethnicities. Despite its racial diversity, the church is largely homogeneous in terms of class and age. Redeemer Congregational Survey Results, 2009.

3 Redeemer now has eight services at three sites every Sunday with Tim Keller preaching at four of the eight services. Referring to a service held at the Hunter College Auditorium, one journalist described it this way: “There’s nothing sexy here. There’s no rock band, no drop-down theater-size video screen, no 100-member gospel choir—just a few chamber musicians and a couple of prayer leaders to help the congregation along in its hymns.” Lisa Miller, “The Smart Shepherd,” Newsweek, February 9, 2008.

4 By “monologic” I aim to capture the overly simple view of the Bible that evangelicals often convey to the public with slogans such as, “God said it, I believe it, that settles it.” This view talks about a complicated historical compilation of books with multiple authors,
aims to do this through a disarming demonstration of familiarity and competence with respected non-Christian writers and thinkers, a reconfiguration of where the skeptical insights of these interlocutors align in an overarching theological narrative, and a resolution of each sermon’s proposed tension with the core claims of Protestant Christianity accompanied by a modulated reintroduction of biblically-shaped language. To accomplish this feat, he taps into the situated existence of sophisticated Manhattanites by simultaneously affirming insightful and intelligent cultural voices, while pulling their key insights into the distinctive Christian framework that he wishes to convey. In short, having demonstrated that he too inhabits his hearers’ milieu, Keller gains a hearing for the Christian meta-narrative, which he, in turn, elaborates and commends. This assessment emerges from listening to and analyzing 25 Tim Keller sermons that have been delivered over the past 20 years, as well as personal attendance at 10 Redeemer services over the previous two years (mostly in the summer of 2012). Keller’s style of preaching has remained remarkably stable over the course of his ministry. While many aspects of his style are unspectacular and commonplace, it seems that he has particularly distinguished himself by embracing the challenge of speaking to both skeptical unbelievers and confessing Christians at the same time. Given both his context and his apparent success, Keller seems to have figured out, at least to some degree, the art of conveying an exclusive message held by “insiders” in an inclusive, civil manner that respects and affirms the dignity, value, and worth of “outsiders.”

The Story of Redeemer

After pastoring a small blue-collar church in Hopewell, Virginia for nine years, Keller became a professor of practical theology at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia in 1984. While there, he became interested in downtown urban ministries, and began thinking through such issues more deeply under the influence of his colleagues, particularly an urban missiologist named Harvey Conn who had spent a number of years doing cross-cultural work in Korea. Originally recruited in 1987 to research the possibility of starting a church in New York City that someone else would pastor, Keller was tasked with the job and accepted it after two other candidates declined. His preliminary field research helped him to learn about the struggles New Yorkers faced and their dislike of judgmental religion; generally speaking, it also helped him gain an idea of how evangelical Christianity could work in the city and attract young professionals. In brief, his approach entailed four parts: the worship services needed to be welcoming but dignified; the preaching had to be intelligent and show familiarity with urban life issues; outreach had to be through friendship networking; and the church had to emphasize a positive view of the city.

Redeemer was launched in the spring of 1989, with 75 people in attendance, the lion’s share being a core group that had initially

as if it were a single-voiced text with an axiomatic source. The point at hand being that such a view may sound anti-intellectual and silly to skeptical non-Christians in New York City.


---

7 Stafford, “How Time Keller Found Manhattan.”


gelled together in a Campus Crusade for Christ outreach effort to New York professionals.\textsuperscript{10} Eschewing advertising and relying solely on word of mouth, attendance had risen to 250 people by the end of the first year, swelled to more than 1,000 by the end of ‘92, and was hovering near 4,000 by 2001.\textsuperscript{11} Then came the unimaginable tragedy of Tuesday, September 11, 2001 that rocked New York City and the nation to its very core. On the Sunday after the September 11\textsuperscript{th} attacks, the morning service at Redeemer was so packed that Keller called for another service on the spot: “Everybody who can’t get in the doors right now, if you come back in two hours, I’ll do another service.”\textsuperscript{12} About 700 people came back; and it seems they stuck around, at least number-wise, as Redeemer’s attendance continued to climb, reaching 5,000 by 2008.\textsuperscript{13} The church now draws close to 6,000 people every Sunday.

Keller’s influence and impact extend far beyond Redeemer’s weekly services. Since 2000, the church has helped found or “plant” seventeen new congregations of its own denomination (the Presbyterian Church in America) in the greater New York metropolitan area and helped other denominations—from Lutheran to Southern Baptist to Assemblies of God—start over fifty churches in the city.\textsuperscript{14} Moreover, the success of their model has influenced the formation of “city-centered” churches in other parts of the U.S.—San Francisco, D.C., Boston—and around the world—Berlin, London, Amsterdam.\textsuperscript{15} Dubbed the most successful Christian evangelist in New York City,\textsuperscript{16} it is no surprise that Christians in global cities from all over the world are flocking to Keller to learn the art of starting churches in cosmopolitan urban centers. Keller insists that Redeemer’s model is transposable and ideal for global cities—with appropriate modifications, that is—given that they are full of young professionals, artists, and the urban poor—a near mirror of Manhattan.\textsuperscript{17}

Having served as Redeemer’s founding pastor for over 20 years Keller is in the midst of passing the baton to his successors and expanding his ministry via the written word. He released his first book, \textit{The Reason for God}, in 2008, which climbed to number seven on \textit{The New York Times} nonfiction bestseller list. He has followed that up with ten other books in quick succession, with more in the works. His popularity is on the rise, as indicated by the 25,000 downloads of his sermons each week.\textsuperscript{18} In short, “Keller is one of the most influential pastors among cosmopolitan evangelicals.”\textsuperscript{19} Hence, taking a closer look at his preaching—what he aims to do and how he seeks to do it—is a worthwhile undertaking, especially as Keller’s homiletic

\textsuperscript{12} Hooper, “Tim Keller Wants to Save Your Yuppies Soul.”
\textsuperscript{13} Hooper, “Tim Keller Wants to Save Your Yuppies Soul”; Luo, “Preaching the Word and Quoting the Voice.”
\textsuperscript{14} Redeemer has been credited with fueling New York City’s “evangelical renaissance” in recent decades, whatever the nature and scope of that “renaissance” might be. John Leland, “The Evangelical Squad,” \textit{The New York Times}, April 22, 2011.
\textsuperscript{15} Luo, “Preaching the Word and Quoting the Voice.”
\textsuperscript{17} One journalist claims that “Keller wants to be the Rick Warren of global cities.” Miller, “The Smart Shepherd.” Such a comment is not far off the mark, as the head of Redeemer’s Church Planting Center made the church’s vision crystal clear in 2009: “You go to Soho or London or Berlin or Madrid or Sao Paolo, and you’ll find a new kind of international culture of young elites and professionals. We go to these city centers and try to reach these kinds of people.” Stafford, “How Tim Keller Found Manhattan.”
\textsuperscript{18} Hooper, “Tim Keller Wants to Save Your Yuppies Soul.”
\textsuperscript{19} Lindsay, “Faith in the Hall of Powers,” 130.
method is a major part of the model that Redeemer is exporting all over the globe.

Accounting for the Success – Making the Message More Credible

Tim Keller’s sermons are of a piece with the broader strategy and cultural positioning of Redeemer church, and together they help account for Keller’s unexpected success in Manhattan. Generally speaking, the church as a whole aims to cultivate a nonjudgmental, welcoming atmosphere, while conveying an intelligent message that encourages the embrace of distinctively Christian claims. Undergirding and informing the church’s outward-facing, inviting posture lie clear doctrinal commitments that find their roots in Reformation theology but express themselves with an openness and warmth uncharacteristic of a tradition that has sometimes been mockingly labeled “the frozen chosen.”

Unlike a lot of Reformed evangelical-types, Keller distances himself from theological narrowness, knit-picking partisan debates, and defensive posturings. Instead, he aims to be open and expansive, working out of a rich tradition that he feels provides him with both breadth and depth.

While not loving every aspect of the amorphous and exceedingly broad movement labeled “evangelicalism,” the church is open to the tag “evangelical” in the sense that they see themselves in line with the historic gospel message, having placed the evangel (or gospel) at the center of all that they do. Redeemer belongs to a conservative denomination called the Presbyterian Church in America and subscribes to the Westminster Standards [1646]. This allegiance provides ballast to the church as it identifies itself with a historic tradition of Christian thought, drawing from its wells rather than many of the passing fads that have come and gone in other parts of evangelicalism. In claiming to align its beliefs with its confessional symbols—a summary of what the church understands the Bible to teach—Redeemer also acknowledges the importance of its present-day situational and historical context. The church seeks to proclaim what it understands to be the historic Christian gospel in contextualized terms that resonate with contemporary New Yorkers.

Redeemer certainly has its non-negotiables, but they largely center on what they deem the core message of Christianity—namely, the gospel (the person and work of Christ)—or, more expansively, “the good news that through Christ the power of God’s kingdom has entered history to renew the whole world.” This is important because unlike stereotypical evangelicals who place “moral concerns at the forefront of their theology,” Redeemer’s utmost concern is with the gospel message.

---


21 This caricature is associated with the Calvinist doctrine of predestination. It conveys the picture of people thinking of themselves as the elect of God and, in turn, disengaging from the world.


24 See Timothy Keller, Center Church (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012). One of the major aims of this book is to help churches think through the issue of contextualization—upholding its doctrinal commitments while effectively engaging its surrounding culture.


26 Paul Froese and Christopher Bader, America’s Four Gods (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 51. Part of Keller’s strategy is to avoid “moral hectoring”
in the church hold conservative positions on hot-topic social issues such as abortion and homosexuality, they make a concerted effort not to lead with positions that polarize people.

A large part of Redeemer’s welcoming and open atmosphere is strategically crafted to overcome stereotypes associated with narrow evangelicalism both within and outside the city. As one can imagine, some of the most powerful stereotypes emerge from evangelicalism’s association with the religious right and Republican politics. How the church ostensibly avoids political landmines and navigates the challenges created by embracing unpopular moral beliefs is worth a closer examination.

In a not too favorable *New York Times* article written in 1998, Redeemer was, for all intensive purposes, labeled just another hard-line evangelical church. In response to the article, Tim and his wife wrote a short letter to the editor that was published in the *Times* as “Redeemer Church Rejects the ‘Hard-Line’ Label.” Their argument was pointed, succinct, and clear: “Fundamentalist churches by definition stress political issues, are culturally narrow, and hostile to the surrounding culture. Redeemer is none of these things. …If we weren’t defying these common categories, we simply would not be helping such a surprising number of professional people in the midst of Manhattan.”

Indeed, the three things highlighted by the Kellers seem to have helped Redeemer gain a hearing among young urbanites and, at least for now, remain in the city’s good graces. Regarding politics, Keller sounds forth a noncommittal stance, rarely, if ever, touching upon political issues from the pulpit. The reason for this has to do with the church’s desire to remove all obstacles to the central Christian message it wishes to proclaim; it has no desire to get embroiled in partisan politics. The church wants to gain a hearing among New Yorkers, not be written off by them; hence, Keller adamantly avoids being forced into the categories that have associated so many evangelical churches with the Republican Party. In a 2011 interview with *The Atlantic*, Keller elaborated on why he thinks Redeemer has escaped from being written off in toto as a bunch of no-thing evangelical fundamentalists:

I’ve seen in a place like New York, because of the identification of orthodox Christianity with conservative politics, there’s actually more antipathy here than there was 20 years ago. There’s more fear. Part of the reason why Redeemer has done well is because we’ve always said, “We’re about Christianity, not politics. And we know that your Christian faith is going to affect your political views… But we also don’t think that your Gospel faith necessarily throws you into one party or the other.” And because we’ve had that stance, it’s one of the reasons I think we haven’t had a backlash here.

As for cultural engagement, Redeemer has consistently voiced a desire to be “a counterculture for the common good” since its

---

30 Lewine, “Making New Christians.”
31 Keller has commented: “If I said, ‘I’m a Democrat’ or ‘I’m a Republican,’ … then the people of the other party aren’t going to listen. They’re going to say, ‘So your gospel isn’t for Republicans.’ Or ‘It’s not for Democrats.’” Susan Wunderink, “Tim Keller Reasons with America,” *Christianity Today*, June 20, 2008.
inception. Keller has insisted that this countercultural attitude not go the way of most evangelical churches—that is, opposing the mainstream by becoming insular and forming its own separate subculture. Instead, Keller encourages a stance within the broader culture as being one of “cultural presence”—a presence that aims to enhance flavor but is in no way interested in taking over. It is a posture that seeks to influence the culture indirectly rather than making a frontal political assault, a la Jerry Falwell and the so-called Moral Majority. Wanting to maintain Christian distinctiveness in the midst of the surrounding culture, Keller insists that a shared epistemology is not necessary for genuine love. In a 2009 interview in *New York Magazine*, Joseph Hooper sketched out Keller’s position on this point when he wrote: Redeemer represents a middle ground, [Keller] says, between the moralism of conventional right-wing Christianity and what he regards as the do-what-feels-right narcissism of secular culture. “Because these are ‘wedge issues’ [homosexuality and sexual ethics],” Keller says, “people will say, ‘You’ve got to be completely with me on this issue or you don’t love me.’ Well, we’re trying to say, ‘We can love you. We really can.’”

---

33 This phrase, coined by Keller, became the foundational element of a series of articles and columns sponsored by the evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* in 2006. Lindsay, *Faith in the Hall of Powers*, 279-280.

34 Stafford, “How Tim Keller Found Manhattan.” Keller longs for, “A Christian community that actually engages the city, works for the common good, shows itself to be … the very best residents of New York City and love the city and still are shaped in their [life and] practices by the gospel…That’s what I think will actually change the culture.” Lindsay, *Faith in the Hall of Powers*, 130-131.


36 Hooper, “Tim Keller Wants to Save Your Yuppie Soul.”

Hooper remained skeptical, but it appears that so far, at least, Redeemer’s nonjudgmental, receptive posture has helped them avoid the ire of most New Yorkers.

A final thing that has helped Redeemer avoid the backlash against evangelicals is its “fiercely pro-city sentiments.” The church shows care and concern for the city mainly through its nonprofit charitable organization, Hope for New York (HFNY), which mobilizes resources in the form of grants (over $1,000,000 last year) and volunteers. A substantial portion of the church, over 3,000 individuals each year, volunteer their time to serve the poor and marginalized in the city with one or more of HFNY’s forty different partner organizations. Keller himself is a strong advocate for social justice, as evidenced by the prominent place he accords to service to the poor and marginalized in his preaching and in the life of Redeemer. With their somewhat successful avoidance of political issues, insistence that evangelical Christians can be of any political stripe, love for the city, and concern to care for the poor

---

37 Later in the article, Hooper highlighted the inevitable tension: “At Redeemer, I tell Keller, you may teach that you should treat your gay, pro-choice, or, for that matter, atheist neighbor with respect, even love, but as a matter of belief, you know that he or she has the misfortune of being wrong. [Keller’s response]: ‘Well, you know what, you can’t teach what we teach—that you must be born again through belief in Jesus Christ—without saying most of the world is wrong.’” Hooper, “Tim Keller Wants to Save Your Yuppie Soul.”

38 Tony Carnes, “New York’s New Hope,” *Christianity Today*, December 1, 2004. Jeremiah 29 is an important passage for the church, especially verse 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 welfare” (English Standard Version).


and marginalized, it appears that Redeemer has done a good job of gaining a hearing among many New Yorkers.

**An Initial Layer of Connection with His Hearers**

Redeemer Church and Tim Keller unashamedly target the highly educated young professionals who reside in Manhattan. Given this fact, critical sociologists would assess the purported phenomena of conservative Redeemer Presbyterian Church growing in the heart of New York City as being rather unspectacular and unsurprising: the bourgeoisie have religious tastes that are intellectual and make themselves feel better with talk of social justice and helping the poor, hence landing a lot of “Bobos” (bourgeoisie bohemians) in a city with 70,000 people per square mile is not surprising. Perhaps this explains a lot of Redeemer’s success; yet, as sociologist of religion Nancy Ammerman concedes, Keller does seem to have a unique ability. She observes that the evangelical message “works quite well for modern individualistic people because it emphasizes individual experience...there is nothing new about [Keller’s] message, but [he] has found a way to package it to appeal to urban professionals.”

Before considering in detail the way Keller packages his message, it is important to revisit the social situation in which he preaches; for, as Valentin Vološinov points out in his classic work, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, “the forms of signs are conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction.” Applying this insight to the case at hand, Keller is well-aware of the prevailing evangelical stereotypes and off-putting associations of conservative Christianity with Republican politics that circulate in Manhattan. In a sense, this is the backdrop, “social organization,” “immediate conditions” (whatever one would like to call it), for Keller’s every message: he wants to encourage and help professing Christians while also reaching skeptical non-believers who are easily put off by the least whiff of evangelical fundie-talk. From this angle, each Redeemer service can be viewed as an “arena for the clash of live social accents.” In order to have success, Keller makes sure he avoids certain well-know evangelical indexical fields or genres while not shrinking back from declaring his distinctively evangelical message—a tricky task, indeed. Another tactic he uses besides avoidance is confrontation, raising the off-putting evangelical register in order to dismiss it.

As for Keller’s target audience, it consists to some extent of “imagined recipients.” Unlike most evangelical preachers who

---

42 Lewine, “Making New Christians.”
44 In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Keller opined: “Frankly, if you are an orthodox Christian in Manhattan right now, it’s a social problem. People are nervous about you, they feel you’re bigoted. And so actually right now if you are a graduate of Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, and you’ve got your MBA, and you’re working on Wall Street, or being a downtown artist or something like that, and if you are an orthodox Christian, that’s very, very subversive. It’s very transgressive.” Barkhorn, “How Timothy Keller Spreads the Gospel in New York City, and Beyond.”
preach to “insiders” familiar with biblical language, Christian jargon, and the evangelical sub-culture, Kellerpreaches to the empty seats, so to speak, crafting each message to reach the skeptical unbeliever that he hopes will be in attendance. He intentionally constructs and delivers his sermons with non-believers in mind, hoping that a skillful deployment of intellectual cultural capital framed in a convincing metanarrative will allow him to connect with religious naysayers. As the church’s vision statement makes clear:

At Redeemer … we treat non-Christians with respect, remembering what it is like to not believe. We consider virtually every public event to be something we do ‘before the nations,’ and we expect to be ‘overheard’ by many friends who do not believe or who don’t know what they believe.

Keller is helped by the church in this regard, as every aspect of the worship service and the sermon are intentionally fashioned to, among other things, make non-believingNew York professionals feel welcomed, acknowledged, and addressed. Along these lines, the church seeks to be “the ideal place for a believer to bring a non-believing friend.”

Regarding the surrounding aesthetics and setting for Keller’s messages, the church aims to create the feel of a popular-level academic lecture. Not wanting to hide behind a pulpit on stage, Keller uses a thin metal stand to hold a few notes and a small Bible, neither of which are visible to the audience. At 6’4” Keller is a tall man with a lanky frame. He wears a suit, not a robe. He is bald and wears glasses. The assessment of his appearance and comportment is unanimous: he looks and talks like one’s favorite college professor. His voice is deep and authoritative, though not booming and theatrical. Eager to avoid keying into the register of fundamentalist Bible preachers, he avoids all of their religious affectation and instead speaks “in a soft, conversational manner, as if he’s sharing confidence with a friend.” Coupling his personable tone with tons of eye contact, everything he does seeks to minimize distance with his hearers and maintain engagement. With that said, he certainly leverages the image of being a well-educated, deep-thinking intellectual, who is a committed Christian. In fact, though rare, Keller sometimes refers to his hearers as “class”—making clear the lecture style quality of his preaching. It doesn’t hurt that Keller is twice as old as Redeemer’s average attendee; he looks and speaks like an older, wiser man. His self-figuring as an astute reader of culture and a “professional in the Bible” help him deliver his distinctively Christian message with authority to those who would otherwise not be prone to listen.

In terms of basic speaking techniques, Keller sprinkles his messages with numerous rhetorical questions, constructs each sermon’s respective argument with easy-to-follow guideposts, offers mid-stream recaps, and makes a concerted effort to maintain mutual alignment and real-time engagement with his

50 Silver, “New York Neo-Puritans,” 265.
51 Hooper, “Tim Keller Wants to Save Your Yuppie Soul.”
52 Miller, “The Smart Shepherd”; Stafford, “How Tim Keller Found Manhattan.”
53 Miller, “The Smart Shepherd.”
54 Hooper, “Tim Keller Wants to Save Your Yuppie Soul.”
56 Tim Keller, “Evolution and Science,” September 10, 2001, mp3. The claim is not as haughty as it sounds; in this in-house teaching session Keller merely acknowledges that he is not a professional scientist but rather a professional in the Bible, able to recognize poetic elements in Genesis 1 that mark it off as being a different kind of literature than straightforward history or a scientific handbook. Nonetheless, the phrase nicely captures Keller’s overall self-figuring.
listeners. His tone and way of approach are nonjudgmental and strategic, being as inclusive as possible in what he says. His default mode seems to be one of “we/us,” rather than “I/you”—even going so far as to convey Romans 1, a passage that seems to entail a clear Christian/non-Christian divide, as applying to the daily lives of every human being (at least tendency-wise, at the heart level). His inclusive, personal language is disarming and can help draw listeners in. Along these lines, Keller often animates voices and speaks from other perspectives. For example, in a sermon entitled “Changed Lives,” he briefly depicts the Bible character, Lydia, from Acts 16, as a modern day business woman, inhabiting her voice as an “embedded animator” in recounting her story of conversion to Christianity.57

A Well-Packaged Message That Resonates

As mentioned, Keller tries to connect with non-Christians by showing himself an able and intelligent reader of sophisticated culture and a voice of reason when it comes to religion. He preaches in such a way that both Christians and non-Christians are ratified hearers.58 His goal of reaching non-Christians greatly shapes and drives his preaching, requiring him to be intellectual, cosmopolitan, culturally aware, and engaging. Wanting to reach sophisticated non-believing Manhattanites, Keller preaches “intellectual, brimstone-free sermons” that demonstrate more cosmopolitan than populous sensibilities.59 He is noted for “delving into the prevailing culture almost as much as into the biblical text,”60 producing messages that entail a broad range of interlocutors—from Woody Allen to Nietzsche, Luther to Freud, Richard Dawkins to John Updike, Karl Marx to Michel Foucault. In short, if Keller can find secular, non-believing, intelligent, or well-known voices to make or illuminate his key points, then he gladly wields them to such an end. Keller’s use of cultural material aims for simplification, not obfuscation. His messages utilize cultural references in an intellectual way in that they demonstrate simple yet profound insights from a variety of great thinkers; this strategy is meant to help people along, not leave anyone behind. It is clear that Keller caters to highly-educated urban young professionals, imbuing his sermons with a wealth of insightful material that seems to be engaging whether one is interested in religion or not.61

Keller makes a concerted effort to connect with the high-pressure, success-driven environment that New Yorkers swim in. He presents himself as one who understands life in the big city. Given that he and his wife live on Roosevelt Island and that Keller himself works 80 hour per week, it seems that his effort to connect proves true and is largely successful.62 Living in the city allows him to credibly reference the imagined “New Yorker” or collective “New Yorkers.”63 He often depicts secular, skeptical ways of thinking by referencing the average New Yorker or referring to pieces from The New York Times, The New York Times Magazine, and other sources.

58 Meaning they have “official status as a ratified participant in the encounter.” Goffman, Forms of Talk, 131.
60 Luo, “Preaching the Word and Quoting the Voice.”
61 Although it is only anecdotal evidence, Luo mentions a fashion designer who had stopped going to church before she discovered Redeemer saying, “You can go to Redeemer and you can not be a Christian and listen to that sermon and be completely engaged.” Luo, “Preaching the Word and Quoting the Voice.”
62 Hooper, “Tim Keller Wants to Save Your Yuppie Soul”; and Luo, “Preaching the Word and Quoting the Voice.”
63 This point was influenced by Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (London: Verso, 2006).
or *The Village Voice*—an aid on both the cosmopolitan front, as well as in being identified as a genuine Manhattanite.

Aiming to influence people spiritually, Keller employs the concepts of identity, heart-motivations, and defining narratives as a means of gaining entrée into discussions of fundamental allegiances and idolatry—a way of approach demonstrated by the title of one of his recent books, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters.* In fact, after the recent financial crisis, Keller pounced on the dog-eat-dog idolatry that pervades prominent pockets of New York City. Along these lines, Keller also tries to tap into the modern existential and therapeutic registers in order to connect with his hearers. Knowing that New Yorkers are driven, busy, and skeptical, he aims at the heart and tries to gain traction via social scientific findings regarding human nature. He also taps into the feelings of loneliness and anonymity that paradoxically accompany life in the big city, urging people to strive for genuine community and connection.

**A Subtler Layer of Connection with His Hearers**

Apart from the more apparent ways of connecting with his listeners, there are a few less transparent undercurrents of connection that permeate Keller’s sermons. Unlike a lot of evangelicals, Keller doesn’t rely on the monologic echoing of Scripture or “in-house” Christian jargon. Instead of leaning heavily on “Bible-based speech codes,” he seeks to inhabit the situated cultural positionings of his listeners. He clearly takes a stand as an intermediary between the audience and the biblical text, interpreting it, applying it, summarizing it, making it more pertinent and palatable—not necessarily watering it down, just removing needless confusion or offense. This is evident in two ways: his reading of Scripture and his referencing its larger ideas.

Although other people in the church normally read the Bible passage connected to the sermon, there are a few instances where Keller himself reads it. When he does, his voice shapes itself (within a natural range) to a text that is highly regarded and treated as distinct, sounding more sober and serious when reading Jeremiah and part of the Sermon on the Mount, yet less so when reading a narrative section of the Book of Acts. In short, one gets the sense that nomically reported speech is being conveyed—speech that is weighty and set apart from the ordinary. However, when it comes to Keller’s actual message, he positions himself more with his hearers than with the text. The monologic text moves more to the background and is interacted with indirectly. One extremely interesting example of this appears in a sermon where he asks his hearers to look with him at the scriptural text, recaps just a few phrases from the biblical passage and blends them seamlessly into his own recounting. It is clear that Keller portrays himself as an intermediary between

---


65 ABC News, “Interview with Tim Keller,” April 24, 2011. Keller told his congregants: “If you put things in perspective, you probably won’t make as much money; though, you might. You will not probably rise as high on the ladder. You ought to be giving more time to family, you ought to be giving more time to relationships, to God, more time to the poor. But you’re also going to be way happier in the long run.”

66 Harding, *The Book of Jerry Falwell*, xii. “Bible-based speech codes” simply parrot the language of the Bible without explaining what it means. It potentially resonates with insiders who are familiar with the terms, but sounds foreign to those on the outside who are not conversant with the religious language.


the audience and the biblical text. He softens it and humanizes it, presenting its message as relevant, reasonable, and incisive.

Another way he does this is when he references the broader teachings of the Bible. He often speaks of “the core message of the Bible,” “the center of Christianity,” or “the heart of Scripture” in order to highlight what he believes is the Christ-centered nature of the Old and New Testaments. This form of shorthand allows Keller to arrive at the punch line of his main points more quickly, while also helping him avoid getting bogged down in thickets of questions that are irrelevant to his focused message. It also helps him to control the theological meta-narrative, amplifying the importance of the key insights that he seeks to convey. A similar strategy is employed when he utilizes the original languages of Scripture. This usually occurs when something is hard to translate into English or a key word or phrase can function as a portal into the modern condition or a broad human experiential concern. Making reference to the original languages also adds to the intellectual nature of Keller’s sermons and conveys the richness and relevance of the Bible to hearers who may not be familiar with it.

Keller seeks to reason with his listeners, preaching what one journalist has described as “cogent, literary sermon[s].” Every message has a clear structure that seems to follow a more-or-less standard pattern. First, Keller normally preaches sermon series that last six to ten weeks [though, occasionally longer series are necessary]. Serving a highly mobile crowd, Keller knows that his audience is constantly changing week after week. Hence, he crafts his sermon series to connect with a transient crowd. The series title and topic form a natural frame that locates each message in a distinctively Christian context and gives focus to Keller’s second goal—namely, making a convincing case for each message’s importance by highlighting a modern cultural concern and bringing it in touch with the sermon’s topic. Sometimes this is extremely easy. For instance, in a series entitled “Arguing with Jesus,” Keller was able to dive into an intriguing topic almost right away with his message on Mark 12:13-17, “Arguing about Politics.” At other times, Keller has to do a lot more work to hook his audience and gain a hearing. In a message entitled “Inside-Out Living,” Keller spends nearly ten minutes bridging the biblical word “righteousness” with what he thinks is its modern manifestation in the cultural concern for approval and acceptance.

Having made a broad connection via a common human concern, the third thing Keller does is chart out logical guideposts that he plans on following in unpacking the key idea of the passage at hand. Keller seems to enjoy presenting Christianity as the third way: the way that keeps one on the straight and narrow; that keeps one from veering into the ditch on the right or the one on the left. For instance, in some sermons the poles of moralism and relativism are often evaluated and found wanting, but resolved by Gospel Christianity. In other messages, the self-concern of religion and irreligion are examined, tagged as two sides of the same coin, and Gospel Christianity provides a release from warped self-concern into “the blessed realm of self-forgetfulness.”

---

69 Luo, “Preaching the Word and Quoting the Voice.”

70 Timothy Keller, “Arguing about Politics: Mark 12:13-17,” July 15, 2001, mp3. This message further confirms Keller’s noncommittal political stance.

71 Timothy Keller, “Inside-Out Living.”

72 Timothy Keller, “Perfect Freedom: Romans 6:1-7, 11-18,” November 19, 2006,” mp3. Another example of Keller’s use of the “third way” appears in his interview with Hooper in New York Magazine: [Keller’s] belief system is not the fundamentalist strain running through many of the Bible Belt megachurches—the ‘saved’ us versus the ‘heathen’ them. Nor is it the new-school ‘be a winner, praise the Lord,’ Christian self-esteem-building ideology of Joel Osteen. Keller advocates something of a third option. He wants to call people’s attention to the emptiness of a way of living that overvalues
self-protection, performance-based living, self-esteem, and the need for approval are other human tendencies that Keller tries to leverage. Contrasting them with their socially defined opposites, he argues that the evangelical gospel resolves their tensions or relocates them to a more reasonable, healthier place.

Fourth, there seems to be a point in each sermon where Keller excavates Christian language and distinctively evangelical themes. A non-Christian who eventually became a Christian at Redeemer, said that initially when he would attend the church, “he liked the sermons ‘until that Jesus business came around at the end’ at which point he’d stop listening.” When Keller introduces Christian claims and articulates his message of salvation, he does so in a gentle way, knowing that becoming a Christian in a place like New York rarely happens in an instant. He avoids the hard sell, knowing that it rarely works in the city and, instead, is content to challenge people bit by bit over time. He is more than happy if people make little decisions regarding Christianity: “One decision might be Christianity is more relevant than I think…or, here’s two Christians that I don’t think are idiots.”

Along these lines, Keller feels that it is imperative for people to understand the grace narrative that lies at the heart of the Christian faith. Week after week he offers people a reinterpretation of their experience, commending the Christian meta-narrative as true-to-life, beautiful, and satisfying. When he

does bring forth the more Bible-based language and theological concepts, they are wielded and shaped in a well-thought-out frame. Each and every sermon is held together by a theologically-informed narrative that functions as an overarching umbrella. His messages are grace-filled and Christ-centered, but also full of potentially offensive and challenging Christian truths. For example, Keller claims that watering down hell and other difficult doctrines of the Christian faith “does irreparable damage to our deepest comforts—our understanding of God’s grace and love and of our human dignity and value to him. To preach the good news, we must [also] preach the bad.” While knowing full-well that not everyone will agree with him, Keller is extremely careful regarding where he draws the battle lines between belief and unbelief, all the while making sure that non-Christians can at least understand his reasoning for embracing his resolution to the message’s proposed dialectical tension. At the end of his narrative, maybe he has indeed offered a viable resolution to the tension he proposed or maybe he just relocated the tension along more biblical lines. Regardless, his goal is to connect and convey the relevance of the gospel message, wanting to retrieve and reclaim what might have been written off as mere fundie-talk if approached directly.

In a sense, Keller does just enough work in the sophisticated cultural register to gain rapport with his hearers in order to return to the biblical language register with greater credibility. But in returning to this mode of speaking, he modulates it, softens it, commends it, and makes it more palatable. If he does use standard Christian jargon (e.g., “you must be born again”), he explains it and teases it out in conjunction with material introduced in dialogue with sophisticated cultural voices. Hence, in this way, it seems

——

worldly achievement and to help them see the spiritual benefits of accepting Jesus Christ, and all he stands for, as their savior. But Keller wants to do that in a way that’s not intellectually insulting or morally hectoring.

Hooper, “Tim Keller Wants to Save Your Yuppie Soul.”

74 Luo, “Preaching the Word and Quoting the Voice.”
75 Wunderlink, “Tim Keller Reasons with America.”
he translates the Bible-laden speech codes, bridging them to the cosmopolitan vernacular while avoiding, or at least trying to avoid, connotations of off-putting fundamentalism.  

**Conclusion**

While it is mainly the content of Keller’s messages that instructs, challenges, and impacts his hearers, there is also a dramaturgical quality to the whole cloth of his sermons. Erving Goffman once wrote, “All in all, then, I am suggesting that often what talkers undertake to do is not to provide information to a recipient but to present dramas to an audience.” Keller’s sermons convey a drama that brings a portion of the monologic biblical text into dialogue with situated cosmopolitan hearers. His avoidance and strategic use of Bible-thumping speech codes creates an unexpected sermon genre that embraces and ingests other voices while cumulatively producing a novelesque sermon within a theological narrative frame. The sweep of each message seeks to bring scriptural truth into contact with skeptics and winsomely convince them that the Christian view of the world just might have the “ring of truth” to it. Indeed, Keller is not preaching anything new, for as Hooper sees it, “For all their modern urban sparkle, his sermons unfailingly resolve into the same Evangelical endgame: Jesus died for our sins. Wake up New Yorkers and accept divine salvation.” While such an assessment may be true, it nonetheless seems that Keller’s efforts represent an encouraging example of successful engagement with thoughtful skeptics, executed with civility and respect. Even more impressively, he seems to have figured out how to accomplish this feat in an extremely pluralistic context marked by largely antithetical values and interests. It would be nice if other evangelicals would take notice and learn a better, more effective way of communicating in and to the broader culture.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


Redeemer Congregational Survey Results, 2009. [unpublished document]


### Appendix – Chronological List of Messages [Date, Title, Scripture, Sermon Series]

[All of the sermons below can be accessed for free at http://sermons2.redeemer.com/]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Scripture</th>
<th>Sermon Series</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>February 21, 1999</td>
<td>Losing My Religion: Why Christians Should Drop Their Religion</td>
<td></td>
<td>Redeemer Open Forums*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 10, 2001</td>
<td>Evolution and Science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 16, 2001</td>
<td>Truth, Tears, Anger &amp; Grace</td>
<td>[John 11:20-53]</td>
<td>The Church in the City</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 5, 2003</td>
<td>The Meaning of the City</td>
<td>[Jer 29:4-14]</td>
<td>The Necessity of Belief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 9, 2007</td>
<td>A Covenant Relationship</td>
<td>[Deut 29:2-4, 9-21]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1, 2009</td>
<td>A Tale of Two Cities</td>
<td>[Gen 4:11-26]</td>
<td>Bible: The Whole Story - Creation &amp; Fall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>