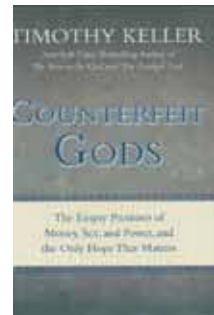

Timothy Keller. *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters*. New York: Dutton, 2009. xxiv + 211 pp. \$19.95.

This is Tim Keller's third book published by Dutton. His first two were *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (2008)—a *New York Times* bestseller—and *The Prodigal God: Recovering the Heart of the Christian Faith* (2008). *Counterfeit Gods* is about our idols, namely, what they are, how to discern them, and how to remove and replace them.



Keller defines idols from multiple angles. “The human heart” is an “idol factory” that

takes good things like a successful career, love, material possessions, even family, and turns them into ultimate things. Our hearts deify them as the center of our lives, because, we think, they can give us significance and security, safety and fulfillment, if we attain them. (p. xiv)

An idol is something we cannot live without. (p. xv)

We think that idols are bad things, but that is almost never the case. . . . Anything can serve as a counterfeit god, especially the very best things in life. (p. xvii)

[An idol is] anything more important to you than God, anything that absorbs your heart and imagination more than God, anything you seek to give you what only God can give. A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living. . . . If anything becomes more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity, then it is an idol. (pp. xvii–xix)

Idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong. . . . [Martin Luther argued that] the fundamental reason behind lawbreaking is idolatry. We never break the other commandments without breaking the first one. (pp. 165–66, emphasis in original)

Idolatry is not just a failure to obey God, it is a setting of the whole heart on something besides God. (p. 171)

Keller gives more than one typology of idolatry. Idols are personal, cultural, and intellectual (pp. xix–xx). Identifying our idols is complicated because they are complexly interwoven: theological, sexual, magic/ritual, political/economic, racial/national, relational, religious, philosophical, cultural, and deep (pp. 203–4n119). “Deep idols” are motivational drives and temperaments—such as power,

approval, comfort, and control—that we make absolutes, and they seek fulfillment through “surface idols” like money, family, or careers (pp. 64–66). *Counterfeit Gods* focuses most on four idols: love, money, success, and power.

Diagnostic questions help us discern our idols (pp. xxi–xxii, 168–70). (1) What do you characteristically daydream about? (2) What do you most fear? What could you lose that would make life not worth living? (3) What fills you with irrational anger, anxiety, despondency, or guilt? (4) What do you effortlessly spend too much money on?

Keller illustrates his analysis of idolatry with stories about Bible characters: Abraham, Jacob, Leah, Zacchaeus, Naaman, Nebuchadnezzar, and Jonah. It occasionally seems like Keller turns to these stories to support his conclusions about idolatry rather than starting with the Bible to reach his conclusions, but perhaps that is a misperception stemming from the way he arranges the material.

Understanding, identifying, and even removing idols is not enough. They must be replaced, and Col 3:1–5 explains how: uproot idols by repentance, and replace them with rejoicing in Christ (pp. 171–73). But “be patient,” Keller warns, because “this process will take our entire lives” (p. 175).

Keller, who first pastored in Virginia and then planted Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan in 1989, writes with a mature pastoral warmth and insight. He offers an unusual blend of pastoral experience, theological acumen, penetrating cultural analysis, disarming explanations of views he rejects, clear prose, and compelling arguments. *Counterfeit Gods* is an incisive, accessible, and convicting exposé of our deeply rooted, widespread idolatry and what we should do about it.

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