

**TIM KELLER with CAREY NIEUWHOF**

## **CNLP 339: TIM KELLER ON HOW TO BRING THE GOSPEL TO POST-CHRISTIAN AMERICA, HOW HE'D PREACH TODAY IF HE WAS STARTING OVER AGAIN, WHY FOUNDERS GET ADDICTED TO THEIR CHURCHES AND WHY HE LEFT REDEEMER**

By [Carey Nieuwhof](#) | [7](#)

<https://careynieuwhof.com/episode339/>

Tim Keller is one of America's most renowned preachers, authors and thought leaders. Tim talks about what NYC was like when he planted Redeemer Church in 1989, how the city has changed, how the culture has changed and how his preaching has evolved and offers profound insights how to reach it, and even talks through how he works through personal discouragement and disappointment.

### **INSIGHTS FROM TIM – An Abridged Version**

**1. Carey Nieuwhof: Evangelicalism has been waiting for people to give in to the social pressure of going to church and then connecting the dots of the morality they were raised in and still believe. Is the church prepared to reach a post-Christendom culture? What are some of the challenges you see over the last decade?**

**Tim Keller:** In my parents' generation, the meaning of life was to be good person. People now value "being true to themselves" over "being a good person" and I just don't think that our church today has any way of dealing with that, and they certainly don't know how to answer somebody who says, "I'm just being true to myself." How we evangelize to that mindset is very different from the "You're never going to overcome your guilt with moral effort. You're going to have to get forgiveness from Jesus." We need to approach evangelism with an argument for why having your identity in Jesus is better than the identity that someone is currently chasing.

**2 Carey Nieuwhof: On evangelism and mission of the church – If you started preaching today, would you shift your message toward identity?**

**Tim Keller:** Fifty years ago, you can say "you know you should be good, but you're not as good as you would like to be, but Jesus Christ can forgive you, and in him you can be accepted by God". Our culture is obsessed with building up our personal identity. So in response to that, "You think the meaning of life is to be free, but you're actually not as free as you think you are. You have to live for something. Everybody has to live for something, and whatever that thing is you're living for will enslave you, and you will feel guilty and shameful because you'll never feel like you can live up to it. I don't care how you guys are forming your identity, there is no identity like the one that you can find in Jesus Christ."

**If the meaning of life is to be free, you're actually not as free as you think you are**

Christianity is the only identity that is received, not achieved. If you say, "I can create myself." That's a lot of pressure, and you can see it online. I said Christianity is the one identity that's received, because of what Jesus Christ did, Jesus Christ is actually a person who lost his glory, and his power, and his privilege, and came, and died on the cross for us, paid the penalty for our inhumanity to God, and to each other. Other words, he took the penalty, and because of that, when I believe in him, I can actually know that God loves me unconditionally, forever.

**Christianity is the only identity that is received, not achieved.**

Postmodern people say that identity is in performance. They say power is performative and identity, it's a role that you play. That's huge pressure. I said we've got an identity that's received, not achieved, that it's not up and down depending on how well I perform, and also, this as an identity that doesn't exclude, because if you have an identity that's based on being an open minded justice oriented person, then you're going to despise the biggest, and one of the reasons you despise the biggest it's a way of you bolstering your kind of flagging sense of self-worth, by basically saying, "Lord, I thank thee I am not as other men, including this tax collector right here." And, that's how you bolster an insecure identity by excluding other people, and looking down at them saying, "I must be okay because I'm not like these horrible people over here."

**When Christ's love becomes your identity, it reorders all your loves**

With a Christian identity you don't have to do that, in James 1:9-10 says, "The rich Christian should think about his low position, and the poor Christian should think about his high position." Now, what's beautiful about that is the Christian identity says you're a sinner, and you would go to hell if it wasn't for Jesus Christ, so it's got the lowest point, it makes you come all the way down here and say, "I can't save myself." So, you give a low position, you're a sinner, you deserve nothing but judgment, and yet in Christ, I am loved more than I dared hope. I'm accepted. Jesus Christ says, "The father loves you even as he loves me. If you're a poor person, and all of your life you've been told you're nothing, and you become a Christian, you should dwell on your high position, dwell on who you are in Jesus Christ, and that will overcome all of the crap you've gotten for so many years from people."

**If you're living for anything but God, you are a slave.**

### **3. Carey Nieuwhof: On political polarization, what are major obstacle for the churches?**

**Tim Keller:** I sees these 4 things clearly:

- Christians ought to be sold out for racial justice.
- Christians should be deeply concerned about the poor.
- Christians should be pro-life.
- Christians should believe that, at least for Christians, sex should only be between a man and woman in marriage.

Two of those beliefs look very conservative and two of those look very liberal, and the Church has to find a way to preach both. Most Christian churches will feel pressure to focus on two of these and neglect the others. You can't give in to letting politics direct what you teach and believe as a church.

### **Carey Nieuwhof: Exegeting the culture?**

**Tim Keller:** Yeah, right, but then you've actually got to find a way to take the plot line of the culture, and give it a happy ending in Jesus. For example, 1 Corinthians 1, says, "The Jews want power, and the Greeks want wisdom, but the cross is weakness to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, but to the Jews and Greeks that are being saved, the true wisdom and true power of God." What is Paul doing? He says, the cultural narrative of the Jews is we're pragmatic, we want to know how you get things done give me power. The cultural narrative of the Greeks was, they're the artists, we want contemplation, we want wisdom, we want beauty, and what he's saying is the gospel confronts the idolatries of both of those cultures differently, but also, fulfils them differently. The cross confronts the idolatry of power and of wisdom, but then it says, but the cross is the true wisdom, the true power of God. In the cross you actually get or culture what you want. It's not just cultural acts of Jesus, it's a contradictive fulfilment. It's subverting it, and fulfilling it, and that's what you have to do, and every culture, that's the missionary task

### **4. Carey Nieuwhof: On why it is important for the Church to be involved in relational health that impact human flourishing.** Harvard researched five categories that promote human flourishing: relationships, spiritual health, fiscal and material stability, vocation and career, and wellness and behavioral health.

**Tim Keller:** Yes, caring about people's flourishing you really cannot ignore any of those, most churches would say the first two, we're going to talk about that, the last three, not so much and will resourced the medical professionals inside the church to talk about it.

All that stuff is answered though the fruit of the spirit, all five of them. See, this is my take on the fruit of the spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, integrity, humility, faithfulness, self-control. So love, patience and kindness is largely about relationships. Joy, peace, and humility is largely about spiritual disciplines. And self-control,

faithfulness, which is faithfulness, integrity, those things actually have a lot more to do with the last three. Basically, the fruit of the spirit covers it. It does, and the fruit of the spirit are a God spirit created character. Proverbs talks about all those five areas in every single area of human flourishing. I would say if you went to Proverbs, and you went to the fruit of the spirit, you basically could preach that, and I do think that's a great way of telling people you really can't ignore any of these areas, and you've got to make sure that you're honouring Christ in each of these areas.

**5. Carey Nieuwhof: What are the top concerns for the church?** These are some of the top findings, **watered down gospel teachings, the culture shift to secularism, poor discipleship, declining attendance and reaching younger audience.**

**Tim Keller:** An interesting list. Watered down gospel. I do think that what they're getting at there is we may be over adapting to the identity narrative. The identity narrative is you got to be true to yourself, and you've got to feel good about yourself. It's possible that you start to adapt the gospel, and turn it into something where Jesus just makes you feel good about yourself, and by the way, what I said earlier about how you would talk about the Christian identity, unless you're careful it can really sound like Jesus is here to boost your self-esteem. You have to say that when Christ's love becomes your identity it reorders all your loves. Which means, that's Augustine, what he would say is, "When Christ is your supreme love, he's the source of your love, but he's also your supreme love."

**When Christ's love becomes your identity it reorders all your loves.**

**Tim Keller:** What that does is it demotes other identities without effacing them, which is another way of saying, if you're Chinese, and you become a Christian you don't start being anything else. You're still Chinese, but your greatest pride isn't who you are in Christ, and therefore what it does is it takes racial pride, it takes vocational pride, it takes those things down a notch, and that has to be said. I've seen youth groups where people are told you find your identity in Christ, which means God loves you even if you screw up, he just loves you all the time, and you should feel good about yourself, and not hate yourself, and it actually just becomes not an understanding of how your whole life is reordered by the gospel. It's like Jesus basically makes you feel better about yourself regardless of whether you change.

**7. Carey Nieuwhof: Young people are falling away from Christianity. Rights, identity, freedom, meaning, satisfaction, justice.** What do you say to the values they have, and that they're trying?

**Tim Keller:** Well, I think Christianity's better resources for what they're trying to do. You're looking for freedom, you're looking for meaning, you're looking for satisfaction,

you're looking for identity, and you're looking for a basis for doing justice. You want a basis for doing justice that doesn't turn you into an oppressor yourself? Do you want to have an identity that's not performative, that is not exclusive? I said, "I got better resources for you." Now, here's why I would start there with them rather than start with what I'd call heart apologetics, and here's the evidence for the resurrection.

Bring people to the place where they wish Christianity was true, then show them it's true." There's really no reason for me to get out the guns on the evidence for the resurrection stuff like that, which is trying to show them that Christianity is true if they don't know it to be true, but if they get to the place where they say, "Gee, it'd be great if that was true, but is it?" Then I can do your more traditional, I ask people to go talk to a non-Christian friend, and they have a set of questions to ask them, and one of the questions is, how do you determine whether something is right or wrong? How do you make a moral judgment? He said, "Almost all the secular people actually tie themselves into pretzels."

**Tim Keller:** The assignment is not to get into a debate, but you can, try to ask a follow up question. How do you tell somebody who doesn't feel that what they're doing is wrong, and his culture tells them it's not wrong, that they're doing something wrong. What would you say to them? They just have no idea because on the one hand they're relativist, and they say, "Nobody can tell me what is right or wrong for me." But then, on the other hand they want to tell other people not to live unjust lives, and that is deeply incoherent. That would be one of the things I would be talking to them about.

**Tim Keller:** The fact is that they don't have a sufficient moral source for their moral ideals, but that would be still not the heart apologetics, that's still saying Christianity has better resources for the things you're seeking than you have, and if I got them to the place where they said, "Oh, that's interesting, but how do I know this is true?" Then I can say, "Well, let's read the gospels, let's talk about the claims of Jesus." Then you get into more traditional apologetics.

## **8. Carey Nieuwhof: On Church growth and the mega Church**

**Tim Keller:** It doesn't say anywhere in the Bible your church has to grow. Ordinarily, if people are growing spiritually, and they're sharing their faith, the church will grow, but that's a by-product. The church must grow spiritually, the church must grow in joy. It must grow in worship. It must grow in those things, and if it's going to grow numerically, then it ought to be a by-product of that, and therefore, I don't want to just do something that kind of does, and run around those things, and just gets more people in the door, and sometimes data can look like it's saying, if you do this, you will grow. I would say the data can tell me what it is, but it can't tell me what I ought to do, and if it looks like it is, then I think it's overstepped its bounds. The data can inform you about what is, and on the base of what is, I can make decisions, but I make decisions on the base of my

moral values, which I get from the scripture. There is a little danger that you say, for example, my church does not have to grow.

**While science can tell you what you can do, and how to do it efficiently, it can never ever tell you whether you should do it or not. - Jürgen Habermas**

**Tim Keller:** I planted a mega church by anybody's standards. I think it was the right thing to do or there wouldn't be a Redeemer City to City, there wouldn't be a counselling centre, there wouldn't be Hope for New York and was a good thing for the whole ecosystem. It is breaking up. We were already three, and eventually four, five, six churches. Not there is no 6,000 person Redeemer Church anymore, there's a whole slew of them, and I think that's good, because generally speaking, when a church gets over a thousand people, it really becomes much more bureaucratic. And, what ends up happening in a very large church is more and more, both the staff, and the lay leaders become people who are not so much doing the ministry at the bottom. Frankly the city would be better off with 10 churches of 500 people in general than one church of 5,000. Having said that, I think almost every city needs a mega church, because they can do things nobody else can do, a couple, but I wouldn't aspire to be the pastor of a mega church. I just want you to know that.

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**8a. Carey Nieuwhof: Anything else on the mega church movement that you've seen over the last 40 years develop?** A lot of them are listening.

**Tim Keller:** Connecting in this generation. It's a discipleship problem, a lot of passivity, and there's a bureaucracy problem where people spend an awful lot of time in just looking at systems instead of doing ministry. I would say moderate sized churches, is the way forward. The pastors can't know everybody in a mega church. I always say to a pastor, if you can interview every single new member personally then your church is still small enough, and if you can't do that anymore, it's too big. If you have 50 pharmacies in a chain, the people running it know almost nothing about pharmaceuticals. They're just looking on ROI, return on investment, bottom lines. They're just operating like they're basically financial people.

I think that the secret mega church I still think it's not the place a lot of the younger justice oriented, postmodern people are showing up. I still think it's not the way of the future, I don't think. I would say if you can find a multiethnic church in a city that's growing, and it's not compromising on any of those four things on the sex, the pro-life, the justice, the racial, if it's multi-ethnic, if it's really equally evangelizing people, calling to repentance, and doing justice, calling people to be a sexual counterculture and work on being antiracist, is probably doing what the church ought to do.

**Carey Nieuwhof:** A lot of leaders listening in right now are discouraged, personally. It's been a tough season, it's hard at home. I'm sure you've had seasons of discouragement. Do you want to just tell us about a time where you felt discouraged, and how you got yourself through it?

**Tim Keller:** Just so many. How will I ever choose them? If you're talking about leadership, the hardest time was there was a period from about 2001 to 2005 or so that was tough for me as a leader, because 9/11 happened, and that's a whole big story. 9/11 in New York City it's a world of discussion as I can't go there. The whole city got depressed, and everybody burned out. The day after 9/11, day after, a Christian minister from Oklahoma City who had been through the Oklahoma City Bombing called and told me, "You're going to have a lot of trouble in your church for the next three or four years. You're going to have people burning out, you're going to have people grieving, you're going to have all sorts of trouble." He kind of gave me the list. On top of that, I got thyroid cancer. On top of that, my wife had Crohn's disease, had a big flare up, and had multiple surgeries on her body.

**Tim Keller:** I stayed the pastor, but basically really let the staff kind of go, and when I actually came back to health after about two years basically, I was still preaching and all that. I came back to health, and I sat down with my staff, and I found that they were all bitter, because I had left them on their own, and they also formed these little silos, and they were actually all having turf battles, and it was a wreck. It was a total wreck, and so, I said, "Oh my gosh, are we ever going to get out of this?" Basically, I did hire a new executive director, Bruce Terrell, who was probably the single biggest help at cleaning all that up, and reintegrating the staff into a community, but about three years before that, I'm not sure how we made it other than to say, you got to keep going, you got to pray. My wife was so sick that at certain point there I thought maybe I should leave the ministry, but I couldn't tell her about it, because then she would feel guilty, but I couldn't tell anybody else about it because I felt I would betray her, so I didn't tell anybody.

**Tim Keller:** I lived with that for a couple years, and never really resolved it other than God never gave me the freedom to leave, so that is when my prayer life really kicked in, in a new way. *My prayer life changed drastically* right during that period of time, just deepened, it got stronger, and pretty much worth it. The whole thing was worth it just for



that, but no key, God sent in somebody who was important, he deepened my prayer life. That's how you get through it.

**Carey Nieuwhof:** Tim, this has been rich, deep, and such a privilege. Thank you.

**Tim Keller:** Thanks for the thanks.

**Carey Nieuwhof:** Yeah. Like, I said, I could have gone back the next day and done another eight hours. One of the things I really appreciate about Tim is I think of all the people alive on the planet, Tim is one of the few in the church space that will be read a hundred years from now. As long as there're humans walking the earth, people will be reading his work, and he continues to produce new content, including new sermons, new books, and helping plant churches around the world. This is also on YouTube, and if you found this episode helpful please do share it with your friends, post it to Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, wherever you are.

## **Questions for Discussion**