



**“An idol is whatever you look at and say, in your heart of hearts, ‘If I have that, then I’ll feel my life has meaning, then I’ll know I have value, then I’ll feel significant and secure.’”**

**Timothy Keller**

## **“Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters” Book Review**

**By Trevin Wax**

This is the Tim Keller book I’ve been waiting for. *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope that Matters* (Penguin, 2009) is an incisive treatment of modern-day idolatry. Building upon his address at the 2009 Gospel Coalition conference, Keller peers into the inner recesses of the heart to expose the hidden idolatries that hold us captive.

Keller’s book stands out among other books on idolatry because of the way he goes beyond superficial expressions of idolatry to the root issues of the heart. Our hearts are idol-making factories that make good gifts from God ultimate in our lives, thereby replacing God in our affections. He writes:

“What is an idol? It 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.” (xvii)

How can you identify these insidious idols? How can you tell if you are worshipping a counterfeit God? Keller says:

“A counterfeit god is anything so central and essential to your life that, should you lose it, your life would feel hardly worth living.”

Counterfeit Gods includes the obvious idols of money, sex and power. But Keller spends time treating idols that most Christians would fail to discern: doctrinal accuracy, religious communities, political activism, and even traditional family values.

Keller not only exposes our dependence upon these idols; he exposes the failure of idols to bring lasting satisfaction. All idols ultimately disappoint us. All idols ultimately enslave us. The results of idolatry are ironic: "...When human beings try to become more than human being, to be as gods, they fall to become lower than human beings." (121)

Over and over again, as I made my way through this book, I found myself nodding my head in agreement at Keller's analysis. But my desire to "amen" the thoughts in this book could only come after multiple prayers of "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!" Counterfeit Gods convicted me of hidden idolatries in my own life. Just when you think you have gotten rid of the idols in your life, Keller brings up additional places where idolatries lurk, places you would have never thought to look. The church is one such place. He writes: "Idolatry functions widely inside religious communities when doctrinal truth is elevated to the position of a false god....their trust in the rightness of their views makes them feel superior." (131)

Churches sometimes turn spiritual gifts and ministry success into a counterfeit god:

"Making an idol out of doctrinal accuracy, ministry success, or moral rectitude leads to constant internal conflict, arrogance and self-righteousness, and oppression of those whose views differ." (132)  
No wonder we so often fail in our Great Commission efforts. Sometimes, the results we label "success" are the very idols eating away at our hearts.

Counterfeit Gods is a terrific book that leads the reader to desperation and then to the cross. This book would lead to despair if not for Keller's constant drawing us back to the gospel – what Christ has accomplished for us idolaters.

The good news is that there is good news. The counterfeit gods are mere parodies of the one true God who has come to conquer our idols and restore us to himself.

## 20 Questions Tim Keller Uses to Diagnose the Idols of the Heart

By Pau Sohn

Tim Keller writes the following in his book *The Gospel in Life: Grace Changes Everything*, page 40: Why do we lie, or fail to love, or break our promises, or live selfishly? Of course, the general answer is "Because we are weak and sinful," but the specific answer is that there is something besides Jesus Christ that we feel we must have to be happy, something that is more important to our heart than God, something that is enslaving our heart through inordinate desires.

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**"The key to change (and even to self-understanding) is therefore to identify the idols of the heart."**

In Keller's book *Counterfeit Gods*, he shares the following twenty questions that will help you diagnose the idols of your heart.

"LIFE ONLY HAS MEANING/I ONLY HAVE WORTH IF...

1. I have power and influence over others." (Power Idolatry)
2. I am loved and respected by \_\_\_\_." (Approval Idolatry)
3. I have this kind of pleasure experience, a particular quality of life." (Comfort idolatry)
4. I am able to get mastery over my life in the area of \_\_\_\_." (Control idolatry)

## Digging Deeper

5. people are dependent on me and need me." (Helping Idolatry)
6. someone is there to protect me and keep me safe." (Dependence idolatry)
7. I am completely free from obligations or responsibilities to take care of someone." (Independence idolatry)
8. I am highly productive and getting a lot done." (Work idolatry)
9. I am being recognized for my accomplishments, and I am excelling in my work." (Achievement idolatry)
10. I have a certain level of wealth, financial freedom, and very nice possessions." (Materialism idolatry)
11. I am adhering to my religion's moral codes and accomplished in its activities." (Religion idolatry)
12. This one person is in my life and happy to be there, and/or happy with me." (Individual person idolatry)
13. I feel I am totally independent of organized religion and am living by a self-made morality." (Irreligion idolatry)
14. My race and culture is ascendant and recognized as superior." (Racial/cultural idolatry)
15. A particular social grouping or professional grouping or other group lets me in." (Inner ring idolatry)
16. My children and/or my parents are happy and happy with me." (Family idolatry)
17. Mr. or Ms. "Right" is in love with me." (Relationship Idolatry)
18. I am hurting, in a problem; only then do I feel worthy of love or able to deal with guilt." (Suffering idolatry)
19. my political or social cause is making progress and ascending in influence or power." (Ideology idolatry)
20. I have a particular kind of look or body image." (Image idolatry)

Then he looks more closely at the first four categories:

If you seek POWER (success, winning, influence)...

Your greatest nightmare: Humiliation

People around you often feel: Used

Your problem emotion: Anger

If you seek APPROVAL (affirmation, love, relationships)...

Your greatest nightmare: Rejection

People around you often feel: Smothered

Your problem emotion: Cowardice

If you seek COMFORT (privacy, lack of stress, freedom)...

Your greatest nightmare: Stress, demands

People around you often feel: Neglected

Your problem emotion: Boredom

If you seek CONTROL (self-discipline, certainty, standards)...

Your greatest nightmare: Uncertainty

People around you often feel: Condemned

Your problem emotion: Worry



Timothy Keller is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, which he started in 1989 with his wife, Kathy, and three young sons. For 28 years he led a diverse congregation of young professionals that grew to a weekly attendance of over 5,000.

He is also the Chairman & Co-Founder of Redeemer City to City (CTC), which starts new churches in New York and other global cities, and publishes books and resources for ministry in an urban environment. In 2017 Dr. Keller transitioned to CTC full time to teach and mentor church planters and seminary students through a joint venture with Reformed Theological Seminary's (RTS), the City Ministry Program. He also works with CTC's global affiliates to launch church planting movements.

Dr. Keller's books, including the New York Times bestselling *The Reason for God* and *The Prodigal God*, have sold over 2 million copies and been translated into 25 languages.

Christianity Today has said, "Fifty years from now, if evangelical Christians are widely known for their love of cities, their commitment to mercy and justice, and their love of their neighbors, Tim Keller will be remembered as a pioneer of the new urban Christians."

Dr. Keller was born and raised in Pennsylvania, and educated at Bucknell University, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary. He previously served as the pastor of West Hopewell Presbyterian Church in Hopewell, Virginia, Associate Professor of Practical Theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, and Director of Mercy Ministries for the Presbyterian Church in America.