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A COUNTERFEIT IDOL:

RESIGNATION AND FAITH IN TIMOTHY KELLER'S *COUNTERFEIT GODS*

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INTRODUCTION

The question "What are the idols in your life?" has become common to hear among American evangelical Christians. At its best, this question leads us to do important self-reflection on what things might be competing with God for our love, devotion, and loyalty so that we can repent and seek God instead. This way of talking and thinking through discipleship has been largely shaped by Timothy Keller's ministry. This theme gets the most focused treatment in his book *Counterfeit Gods*.[1] In this book, Dr. Keller draws upon the insights of thinkers such as Martin Luther, John Calvin, and especially their teacher, St. Augustine. Augustine's basic insight, as rearticulated by Keller, is a valuable one: we sin because of our own "disordered loves/priorities." The highest loyalty and love a human being has should be reserved for God alone, as indicated by Jesus's reiteration of the command to love the Lord supremely (Matt. 22:37; Deut. 6:5) and God's command to have "no other God's before me" (Exod. 20:3). Keller names as "idols" things which may become potential rivals for ultimate affection besides God and examines the teaching of the Bible on idolatry as relevant to modern day Christians.

Dr. Keller's work in this area has been beneficial by bringing this classical insight back to light and helping Christians apply it practically to their day-to-day discipleship. And though I am generally sympathetic toward using the word "idol" in an extended metaphorical sense, I believe that this category of metaphorical idol has been misapplied in one key example in *Counterfeit Gods.* This misapplication suggests a potential danger with this way of thinking that I mean to address in what follows. The example referred to is the narrative of the Binding of Isaac found in Genesis 22. I argue below that Keller has misidentified this story as an example of metaphorical idolatry.

I believe that Keller's interpretation of this story deserves attention and, as I argue, correction for a few reasons. First, Keller's interpretation of Genesis 22 takes

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[1] Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009).

a paradigmatic position in *Counterfeit Gods*. By placing it in the first chapter of the book, Keller uses the story of Abraham and Isaac as a model through which the subsequent examples of "idolatry" are meant to be viewed. Readers are therefore encouraged to compare instances of possible idolatry in their own lives to this incident to determine if they might be guilty of idolatry. If Abraham's love for Isaac is not an instance of idolatry, it will lead people to possibly confuse neutral or innocent practices as idolatrous and make any *real* instances of idolatry in their lives more difficult to recognize. Second, because Dr. Keller's work has had widespread beneficial influence on the church, his books are rightfully looked to with a great deal of respect. Therefore, we can assume that *Counterfeit Gods* has become an influential text. If there is an important misstep in the book, it is bound to have widespread impact.

In what follows, I will first attempt a fair summary of the interpretation of Genesis 22 put forth in *Counterfeit Gods* while focusing on the concepts and distinctions that will be relevant in later considerations. I shall then question that interpretation and attempt to provide another by considering the passages in later biblical revelation that address the events of Genesis 22. With this different interpretation in place, I will draw attention to the pastoral implications of these two differing interpretations for the lives of ordinary Christians by contrasting the advice of *Counterfeit Gods* with another book that meditates on Genesis 22, Søren Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.

Main Points from the Binding of Isaac in *Counterfeit Gods*

In the introduction to *Counterfeit Gods*, Keller gives a basic functional definition of 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."[2] This definition becomes a helpful criterion to which Keller returns in the various chapters of the book, using it to determine whether we elevate various creaturely goods (e.g., human love, money, success) to idol status. However, before moving on to those more specific instances of possible idolatry, the first chapter is an investigation of the need for God to break us of our idols in general. This is where Keller presents Abraham's call to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22 as a generic paradigm for the problem of idolatry.

Countless readers have been perplexed and even offended by the story of the *Aqedah*, or "The Binding of Isaac." This passage often provokes the question: *why?* Why would God ask Abraham to do this thing? Why would God test his servant at all? And, why specifically *this* test? Keller suggests a possible reason: the test was given to prevent idolatry in Abraham. For Keller, the logic of God's request is to test a rivalry of loves. After waiting years for the child that God promised, "the question now was—had he been waiting and sacrificing for God, or for the boy? Was God just a means to an end? To whom was Abraham ultimately giving his heart?"[3] It is implied

[2] Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, xix.
[3] Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 6.

that, for Abraham, Isaac had become (or was in the process of becoming) a rival god—"an idol." Though Keller recognizes that Isaac's birth is the fulfillment of a divine promise and a divinely sanctioned joyous gift, he also sees Isaac as an opportunity for temptation because of Abraham's attachment to his son.[4]

The crucial passage for understanding Keller's interpretation comes immediately after he replicates the text of God's call on Abraham in Genesis 22:2: "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about."[5] Keller then says,

> This was the ultimate test. Isaac was now everything to Abraham, as God's call makes clear. He does not refer to the boy as "Isaac," but as "your son, your only son, whom you love." Abraham's affection had become adoration. Previously, Abraham's meaning in life has been dependent on God's word. Now it was becoming dependent on Isaac's love and well-being. The center of Abraham's life was shifting. God was not saying you cannot love your son, but that you must not turn a loved one into a counterfeit god.[6]

Before moving on, it is worth examining the reasons given for this interpretation. One reason Keller gives is that God refers to Isaac as "your son, your only son, whom you love." Keller thinks this phrasing indicates that it is Abraham's love for God that needs testing—since his love for his son is so great. God would then be testing how these loves compare to each other with regard to strength.

It is true that this phrase is an extraordinary way of referring to Isaac. It seems clear that God (and the author of Genesis) is bringing attention to that fact by the way it is expressed. However, this does not necessarily imply all that Dr. Keller suggests. This curious turn of phrase certainly emphasizes the *difficulty* of Abraham's test (i.e., it will be very hard for Abraham to kill his son since Isaac is so beloved), yet it does not give a *reason* for the test (which would in essence be: the fact that he is so beloved is the reason I am asking you to sacrifice him). One could argue that the repetition of this designation for Isaac[7] in verses 12 and 16 confirms Keller's argument that this was a test of rival loves. The Angel of the Lord calls to Abraham: "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him, for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Gen. 22:16). Yet, once again, this does not necessarily provide the reason for the test but only reaffirms how difficult it must have been. What does become apparent in 22:16 is that the crucial aspect under testing is whether Abraham "fear[s] God"; the angel announces that Abraham's actions have demonstrated that he does indeed fear God and Abraham thereby passes the test. Keller explicitly states that the expression "fear God" means to *love* God more than any other thing. "What Abraham was able to see

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[4] Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 5–6.
[5] Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 7.
[6] Keller, *Counterfeit Gods,* 7.
[7] Albeit without the phrase "whom you love."

was that this test was about loving God supremely. In the end the Lord said to him, 'Now I know you fear God.' . . . The Lord is saying, 'Now I know that you love me more than anything in the world.' That's what 'the fear of God' means."[8] However, this identification between love and the fear of God in this passage is not evident to all and will be questioned below.

One last thing of note, which will be a significant point later, is this: Keller includes a call to what I will label "resignation" in his definition of fearing God. By the term resignation, I mean the willingness to let go of and permanently live without certain things. Keller suggests that the test was a choice between Isaac and God: "As long as Abraham never had to choose between his son and obedience to God, he could not see that his love was becoming idolatrous."[9] And later Keller makes clear that he means a *permanent* or *exclusive* choice; he sees Abraham's test as representing a total either/or decision which may be replicated in Christians' lives as well: "like Abraham, you could take a walk up into the mountains. You could say, 'I see that you may be calling me to live my life without something I never thought I could live without."[10] For Keller, if Abraham was not willing to live permanently without Isaac "he would have failed the test!"[11] In summary, according to Keller, what it means to "fear God" in Abraham's situation is for Abraham to love God more than all other things and to become willing to permanently renounce Isaac if God requires it.

An Alternative Interpretation of Abraham's Test

Now that we have examined the argument of the relevant chapter in *Counterfeit Gods*, we turn to propose an alternative interpretation of Genesis 22, especially with regard to *what was being tested*. Keller claims that God was testing whether Abraham loved Isaac more than the Lord; I will suggest that God was testing Abraham's faith in God's Word.

In order to make my case, I will draw heavily on later biblical revelation (especially the book of Hebrews), believing that this later revelation sheds valuable light which clarifies this earlier episode. Though the text of Genesis 22, when read in isolation from the rest of the canon, may be interpreted ambiguously,[12] I believe when interpreted in light of later revelation some of these ambiguities are resolved. This represents a self-conscious "Scripture interprets Scripture" hermeneutic. This practice is based transparently on a theological understanding of what the divine

[8] Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 13.

[9] Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 13–14.

[10] Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 19.

[11] Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 20.

[12] For instance, what did Abraham mean when he said, "the LORD will provide, my son?" Did Abraham expect a substitute? Was he claiming that Isaac *himself* is what the LORD provided? Or, for another example, was Abraham lying when he told the servants that he and Isaac would return? For a discussion, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary 2 (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1994), 114–15.

authorship (concurrent with human authorship) of the books of the canon entails. One such entailment is the consistency of all the sections of Scripture with each other. This is an example of what is now called "theological interpretation of Scripture," which previously was the mainstream practice of historic Protestant interpretation.[13]

Hebrews 11 on the Binding of Isaac

The Binding of Isaac is a unique incident in the Old Testament in that we have multiple examples of New Testament texts which refer to it and interpret its significance. The prominent instances of this New Testament reflection on Genesis 22 occur in James 2:21–23 and Hebrews 11:17–19.[14] The most important passage for our discussion is Hebrews 11:17–19, since, as William Lane points out, "The clearest and most complete reference to the *Aqedah* in the NT is found in vv. 17–19."[15] As this passage is so crucial for interpreting Genesis 22 canonically, I will reproduce all three verses here in the ESV.

> [17] By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was in the act of offering up his only son, [18] of whom it was said, "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named." [19] He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back.

For our discussion, the most striking thing to notice is that the author of Hebrews mentions in verse 19 that Abraham was expecting to "receive back" Isaac from the dead. On what grounds does he say that Abraham had an expectation of Isaac's resurrection/resuscitation?[16] The following details indicate his line of reasoning.

First, the author of Hebrews designates Abraham as "he who had received the promises" and also explicitly specifies that he had been told by God that "through Isaac shall your offspring be named" (v. 18). This specific promise to Abraham is recorded in Genesis 21:12, which is the chapter immediately preceding the narrative of the *Aqedah* (Gen. 22). In chapter 21, God designates that Isaac alone and not

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[13] Space does not allow a full rationale for my use of such a method; I refer readers especially to chapter 28 of the Scots Confession as a succinct and useful argument for this practice. Similar statements also appear in the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion of the Church of England (Article 20) and the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF 1.9).

[14] Significantly, both of these NT passages relate the importance of Genesis 22 in terms of Abraham's faith.

[15] William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9 – 13*, Word Biblical Commentary 47B (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1991), 360.

[16] Some object to the use of the word resurrection for anything other than Jesus's resurrection and the general resurrection at the end of history. They do this to maintain the theological independence of those events, that is, that they are strikingly dissimilar to the resuscitation of the widow's son by Elijah, the raising of Lazarus, etc. The main difference appears to be the *permanent* aspect of resurrection as compared with merely "receiving back" the dead for a time until they have to die again.

Ishmael will fulfill the promise of "offspring" (זֶרַע) which has been pivotal in the Abraham cycle (e.g., Gen. 15:5–6; 18:18). Chapters 21 and 22 are therefore linked by the logic of narrowing the promise to Isaac specifically; this promise and the command to send away Ishmael are the reasons why Isaac is now considered as Abraham's "only son" in Genesis 22:2. This focusing of the promises on Isaac alone accounts for a large portion of the difficulty of God's request to sacrifice him—as Donald Guthrie recognizes: "The pathos of Abraham's dilemma is vividly brought out by the use of *only son* (*monogenēs*), which must be understood in relation to the promise. Ishmael was also Abraham's son, but Isaac was the sole heir to the promises."[17]

"By Faith He Offered": What Then is Faith?

In order to discover what was being tested in Genesis 22, we also need to consider why the author of Hebrews brings this story up as an example of faith. And more basic than that, we need to ask what exactly the word "faith" means in this context according to the author of Hebrews.

It is widely known that Hebrews 11 is all about faith. Relevant for our purposes, from this chapter we are able to see that "faith" (πίστις) is not a generalized, diffuse attitude as many people think of it today. Some consider faith to be a nondescript openness to trust with no particular object of belief. Rather, the author of Hebrews describes faith in more definite terms: "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb.11:1). Yet, we may still ask what are the objects of this faith; in other words, what does faith hope for and what is it convinced of, specifically? As an answer, the author of Hebrews gives examples of such conviction and assurance in the rest of the chapter. These examples of faith include Noah believing the flood prediction (11:7) and Abraham obeying the command to leave Ur (11:8)—both of which are responses of obedience, motivated by belief in a verbal revelation from the Lord.

Another of the paradigmatic examples of faith in Hebrews 11 is that of verse 11: "By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised."[18] Once again we see faith as a reckoning of God as telling the truth and intending good—meaning that whatever he says will come to pass and/or ought to be obeyed.[19] In striking parallel to Hebrews'

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[17] Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 237.

[18] This verse is notoriously hard to translate but only because it is not clear whether Abraham or Sarah should be the subject of the sentence (e.g., ESV for Sarah, NET for Abraham). However, in either translation the main point for our purposes would not change: faith is equivalent to the idea that πιστὸν ἡγήσατο τὸν ἐπαγγειλάμενον ("she or he considered faithful the one who had promised").

[19] A word in modern English that summarizes what faith reckons to God is "trustworthiness." Trustworthiness includes both an expectation of truthfulness and a reliance on the good character of the person speaking.

description of Sarah "considering him faithful who had promised," there are Paul's words in Romans 4 where he characterizes Abraham's faith as being "fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (Rom. 4:21). Another parallel between Hebrews 11 and Romans 4 is that both passages refer to Isaac's conception as a miracle since Abraham's and Sarah's bodies were "as good as dead" (Rom. 4:19; Heb. 11:11–12). Yet, both were able to believe that Isaac's birth was possible—*because* God had promised, *and,* "all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27).

Hence, we see that "faith" in Hebrews 11 (and Romans 4) does not refer simply to an attitude of trust, but rather is a conviction that what God says must be true and ought to be obeyed. It is an association between the word of God and the character, authority, and truthfulness of its speaker. In the case of a prediction or promise concerning future events, it is a conviction that what God says must take place. In the case of a command, it means trusting that God must have his good reasons for commanding this—whether we know those reasons or not—and ought to be obeyed.

"By Faith He Offered": Faith in What?

Therefore, we must bear this in mind when we turn to the verses about the Binding of Isaac in Hebrews 11, when the author says that Abraham offered Isaac πίστει ("by faith"). Faith means believing the word of God to the point that belief leads to obedience. If faith is always connected to a specific word from God, we may ask which word(s) of God applied to Abraham's situation in Genesis 22? First, the author brings our attention to the fact that Abraham had the word of promise: "through Isaac [exclusively] your offspring shall be named." It was revealed to Abraham that through Isaac, and *in no other way*, would God's promise concerning his offspring be fulfilled. And yet, second, Abraham also had the word of God's command to "take your son . . . and offer him . . . as a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:2).[20] This too was the word of God: something to be believed and obeyed.

Gareth Lee Cockerill summarizes the tension to which the author of Hebrews is drawing our attention: "How could Abraham explain these two facts: God had promised him many descendants through Isaac; God commanded him to offer this very Isaac as a sacrifice?"[21] Here we begin to understand the astounding logic that the author of Hebrews uses. The only solution to the dilemma would be this: God must be able to raise the dead! And "God's ability *to raise men even from the dead* would not have been too readily accepted even by Abraham, but he had come to the view that this would be the only way that God could maintain his integrity if the offering

[20] The belief that this command was a true word from God is suggested by the author of Hebrews when he uses the passive voice for the participle πειραζόμενος ("when he was tested"). This is because God's action is often referred to in the New Testament by placing the verb in the passive voice—the so-called "divine passive."

[21] Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2012), 252.

of Isaac was to proceed."[22] Therefore, "Abraham came to the conclusion that if he obeyed God's command God could still fulfill his promise because 'God is able to raise from the dead.'"[23]

Returning to consider the flow of Hebrews 11, where the author is giving examples of *faith*, what is it in this episode that the author believes demonstrated Abraham's faith? The first and simplest answer is his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. After all, verse 17 starts with "by faith Abraham offered . . ."; he trusted that God had really commanded this and obeyed God's command to offer Isaac.[24] Yet, at the

[22] Guthrie, *Hebrews*, 238.

[23] Cockerill, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 252.

[24] It is an important (and controversial) point that it was surely *God* who spoke to Abraham and gave him the command, and that it was right for Abraham to be certain that it was God's voice. There has been debate as to whether Abraham could have known that it was God speaking to him, and, if not, whether he should have rejected the command as not coming from God because it suggested immorality. Immanuel Kant famously said that Abraham should have disobeyed the voice on the basis that God never commands immorality and that we have sufficient rational powers to discern between what is moral and immoral. Even Luther himself toyed with this interpretation. The idea that Abraham *should* have disobeyed has resurfaced in J. Richard Middleton, *Abraham's Silence: The Binding of Isaac, the Suffering of Job, and How to Talk Back to God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021).

Keller inadvertently echoes Kant's suggestion that Abraham could have adjudicated the command by his own moral understanding: "If Abraham had heard a voice sounding like God's saying, 'Get up and kill Sarah,' Abraham would probably never have done it. He would have rightly assumed that he was hallucinating, for God would not ask him to do something that clearly contradicted everything he had ever said about justice and righteousness." Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 10. But Dr. Keller doesn't realize that the command to offer Isaac may not have appeared to contradict certain moral notions Abraham had (*pace* Kant), but it *did* seem to "contradict everything God had said" in a different area—namely, the seed promise and Isaac's designation as the promised heir.

We have little access to the views of religion in the time of the patriarchs (i.e., whether child sacrifice was a common practice in surrounding cultures) and therefore cannot confirm or deny whether Abraham believed child sacrifice was immoral. However, we have much greater certainty about "what God had ever said" on the topic of Isaac and the seed promise. As Calvin noted, "Moses points out the kind of temptation; namely, that God would shake the faith which the holy man had placed in His *word* ["everything he had ever said"], by a counter assault of the word itself." John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, trans. John King, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948), on Gen. 22:2.

Furthermore, Calvin suggests that Abraham's certainty that the command came from God wasn't based on it making sense to him, but from some other source, something analogous to the "internal testimony of the Holy Spirit" which Calvin so powerfully expounds elsewhere in the *Institutes* (I.vii): "For unless Abraham had been fully persuaded that it was the voice of God which commanded him to slay his son Isaac, he would have been easily released from anxiety; for, relying on the certain promise of God, he would have rejected the suggestion as the fallacy of Satan; and thus, without any difficulty, the temptation would have been shaken

same time, the truly astounding aspect of Abraham's faith is that he *simultaneously* believed that the promise would still be fulfilled through Isaac. In other words, Abraham's belief that he would receive Isaac back *also* profoundly demonstrated Abraham's faith in God's word—specifically, faith in the word of the promise. Abraham's thinking may have run like this: "God must be true, and he said that through Isaac shall my offspring be named; perhaps I must kill Isaac, but if that is the case, then God *will* raise him from the dead because he *must, for he has promised* to only work through Isaac."[25]

The marvel of Abraham's faith is that he believed the whole word of God that had been spoken to him—not just one or the other, *either* the command *or* the promise; he believed *both*. When we understand this, we see that what was being tested in Genesis 22 was not Abraham's love for God, but rather, his faith—that is, his ability to believe the promise and obey the command *at the same time*. Recall again Calvin's statement that the author of Genesis "points out the kind of temptation; namely, that God would shake the faith which the holy man had placed in His *word*, by a counter assault of the word itself."[26] That terrible situation probed whether Abraham would dare to imagine that, although humanly speaking the command and the promise appeared to contradict each other, still they both came from the same truthful, all-powerful God; thus, there must be a way for them to cohere. Once again, from Calvin:

> His mind . . . must of necessity have been severely crushed, and violently agitated, when the command and the promise of God were conflicting within him. But when he had come to the conclusion, that the God with whom he knew he had to do, could not be his adversary; although he did not immediately discover how the contradiction might be removed, he nevertheless, by hope, reconciled the command with the promise; because, being indubitably persuaded that God was faithful, he left the unknown issue to Divine Providence.[27]

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off. But now all occasion of doubt is removed; so that, without controversy, he acknowledges the oracle, which he hears, to be from God."

[25] It is important to remember that this reliance on the miraculous wasn't completely without precedent in Abraham's life: Isaac's birth was a demonstration of God's power to bring life to that which is dead. In his commentary on Genesis, Calvin points out that Abraham had experience of God's power to "raise the dead" in the barrenness of his and Sarah's bodies: "But as before, when he expected seed from his own dead body, he, by hope, rose above what it seemed possible to hope for; so now, in the death of his son, he apprehends the quickening power of God, in such a manner, as to promise himself a blessing out of the ashes of his son, he emerges from the labyrinth of temptation." Calvin, *Commentary on Genesi*s, on Gen. 22:2. In the impossible birth of Isaac, Abraham had already witnessed God's resurrection power.

[26] Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, on Gen. 22:2; see also n24 above.

[27] Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, on Gen 22:2.

RETURNING TO AND COMPARING WITH *COUNTERFEIT GODS*

If the interpretation I have offered here is correct,[28] then Hebrews 11 and Dr. Keller's interpretation would ultimately be found to contradict one another. Why? It has to do specifically with the suggestion by Keller that Abraham was called to forego Isaac permanently. In other words, it all comes down to whether Abraham was called to what I am calling "resignation" in the command to sacrifice Isaac. Keller claims:

> We must not make the mistake of thinking that this story means all we have to do is be willing to part with our idols rather than actually leave them behind. If Abraham had gone up the mountain thinking, "All I have to do is put Isaac on the altar, not really give him up"—he would have failed the test! Something is safe for us to maintain in our lives only if it has really stopped being an idol. This can happen only when we are truly willing to live without it, when we truly say from the heart: "Because I have God, I can live without you."[29]

Keller says Abraham must be willing to live without Isaac, but this is precisely what Abraham was not allowed to do! As Calvin says, "In order that [Abraham] might obey God, *it was necessary* that he should tenaciously hold the promise [of offspring through Isaac], which had it failed, faith must have perished."[30] The author of Hebrews points to the depth of Abraham's faith in the fact that Abraham reckoned that receiving Isaac back *was non-negotiable*; otherwise, how could God's promise be true? What Keller describes as a virtue on Abraham's part (his willingness to resign Isaac forever), for the author of Hebrews would actually have been a failure to believe God.

This then is the precise difference between Keller's interpretation and what I believe the book of Hebrews requires: *Keller says Abraham would have failed the test if he was not willing to let go of Isaac's life; Hebrews suggests that Abraham would have failed if he expected Isaac to remain dead.* To resign the hope of Isaac's continued life would be to fall off one side of the dilemma constructed by the apparent contradiction between command and promise, rather than to press on to one of the deepest expressions of trust ever exhibited by man in the *whole* counsel of God. Consider this alternative depiction of Abraham's faith from Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* that strikes the balance Hebrews is describing:

> But what did Abraham do? He arrived neither too early nor too late. He mounted the ass, he rode slowly down the road. During all this time he had *faith*, he had faith that *God would not demand Isaac of him*, and yet he was willing to sacrifice him if it

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[28] Which interpretation is not idiosyncratically my own. The best commentary on Genesis 22 that I have read is by John Calvin and I have already referred to it numerous times. My interpretation basically follows his with almost no deviation. Less similar, but also claiming that it was specifically Abraham's *faith* in God's Word that was being tested, is Luther's explanation of this story in his *Lectures on Genesis*.

[29] Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 20.

[30] Calvin, *Commentary on Genesis*, on Gen. 22:2, emphasis added.

> was demanded. . . . He climbed the mountain, and even in the moment when the knife gleamed he had faith—that God would not require Isaac. . . . Let us go further. We let Isaac be actually sacrificed. Abraham had faith. He did not have faith that he would be blessed in a future life but that he would be blessed here in the world. God could give him a new Isaac, could restore to life the one sacrificed. He had faith by virtue of the absurd, for all human calculation ceased long ago.[31]

In summary, we can conclude that it was Abraham's faith in all of God's revelation that was being tested in the story recorded in Genesis 22; consequently, it was for his *faith* that he was commended (Heb. 11:39). Therefore, we conclude that when the angel announces that Abraham's actions reveal that he "fear[s] God," this must mean that he shows reverence for God by revering the authority and veracity of all God's speech (specifically those words recorded in Gen. 21:12 and 22:2).

Practical Theology: Distinguishing Faith and Resignation

What, if any, is the practical benefit from choosing between these competing interpretations of Genesis 22? I will suggest that treating Isaac wrongly as a counterfeit god teaches an overly *resigned* Christian ethic of which we need to be wary. This point was made clear to me by Søren Kierkegaard's book *Fear and Trembling*, which also meditates on the Binding of Isaac. Kierkegaard's contribution in this book does not lie in exegesis; as indicated above, his interpretation is very close to that of Calvin. Rather, what Kierkegaard contributes throughout his corpus is a profound understanding of the dynamics inherent in faith—and in *Fear and Trembling*, the dynamics observable in Abraham's faith in particular.

Before we can dive in, however, we must first bring to light and understand Kierkegaard's unique rhetorical strategy in *Fear and Trembling*. It is important to recognize that the purported author of the book is not Kierkegaard himself but a character that Kierkegaard constructs named Johannes de Silentio. This "character-author"[32] holds a perspective of his own, with which Kierkegaard may or may not agree in all respects. Kierkegaard chose this communication method to illustrate to people what a person who held such a worldview would be like and the kind of things such a person would say.

Important for our considerations is that Silentio confesses unequivocally that he is *not* a Christian.[33] Silentio writes this book because he is fascinated by Abraham. This is because Silentio sees Abraham as a paragon of faith (as does the apostle Paul) and yet at the same time he does not believe he can imitate the faith he sees in Abra-

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[31] Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling: Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, Kierkegaard's Writings VI (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 36, emphasis added.

[32] A better and more descriptive phrase than the traditional word for these authors as "pseudonyms."

[33] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 32, 34.

ham. Silentio examines Abraham's example of faith "from the outside," as it were, and Silentio thereby portrays a vivid foil to a real person of faith. Silentio can describe what faith must mean but does not think he is able to be a believer. Significantly, he reaches this conclusion by comparing himself to Abraham's example.

Silentio sets up a series of contrasts between Abraham and himself—in other words, between someone who has biblical faith and one who does not. Silentio confesses belief in God in a general way—as an abstract, generic deity, something akin to the Deist or Idealist forms of religion that were on offer when he wrote in the nineteenth century. Silentio says that he believes in a loving God but, "To me God's love . . . is incommensurable with the whole of actuality," that is, the real world.[34] He believes that "God is love" and that in the afterlife that love will be enjoyed, but that God's love does not interact with or demonstrate itself in the present events of life.[35] This means that, in Silentio's words, "I do not trouble God with my little troubles" because God's love is so transcendent and detached from this world's details.[36] However, he recognizes that this is a contrast to biblical faith since in the Bible "faith is convinced that God is concerned about the smallest things."[37] In a poignant phrase, this deistic character says, "I am satisfied with a left-handed marriage in this life; faith is humble enough to insist on the right hand."[38]

He then goes on to compare himself to Abraham and consider what he, Silentio, would have done if he had been called to sacrifice Isaac. He voices, therefore, what Kierkegaard thinks a Deist would do in Abraham's scenario: "The moment I mounted the horse, I would have said to myself: Now all is lost, God demands Isaac, I sacrifice him and along with him all my joy—yet God is love and continues to be that for me."[39] Silentio imagines that someone might suggest that his "immense resignation would be far more ideal and poetic than Abraham's small-mindedness" in wanting Isaac back. But, Silentio says this would be a mistake "for my immense resignation would be a *substitute* for faith."[40] Silentio sees resignation as *easier* than faith, because resignation is something that lies within our power. On the other hand, Abraham's happiness and hope relied on God's power, and by hoping in the return of Isaac he was making his happiness dependent on something God had promised and that only God could do. Silentio then concludes: "If it had been otherwise with Abraham [i.e., that he was completely resigned to the loss of Isaac], he perhaps would have loved God but would not have had faith, for he who loves God without faith reflects upon himself; he who loves God in faith reflects upon God."[41]

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[34] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 34.
[35] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 35.
[36] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 34.
[37] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 34.
[38] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 34.
[39] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 35.
[40] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 35; emphasis added.
[41] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 37. Notice the contrast between faith and love that

At this point, it is startling to notice how similar Silentio's description of resignation as a substitute for faith is to Keller's description of what *ought* to be done in Abraham's situation. We recall that the lesson Keller draws from this story is that "like Abraham, you could take a walk up into the mountains. You could say, 'I see that you may be calling me to live my life without something I never thought I could live without."[42] Once again, Abraham's test is portrayed as a rivalry of loves—as an *either/or situation.* Abraham must choose; he can have either have Isaac or God.

Remarkably, however, Silentio the Deist says that he could do what Keller recommends, but not the opposite. This is because it would require only resignation to give up Isaac, but it would require true faith to expect to receive Isaac back. Silentio could wait on eternal life to be his consolation for any amount of loss in this life, but he couldn't tenaciously expect God to keep his promise to give good gifts in this present age. This is different from Abraham because "Abraham . . . had faith for this life. In fact, if his faith had been only for a life to come, he certainly would have more readily discarded everything. . . . But Abraham's faith was not of this sort, if there is such a faith at all."[43]

Conclusion

I am afraid that by identifying the command to sacrifice Isaac as something required because of Abraham's idolatrous affection for his son, Keller might promote a certain form of Christian Stoicism among readers of *Counterfeit Gods*.[44] This story is not about a rivalry of loves as much as it is about faith that tenaciously holds both to the promises and commands of God and the resultant paradoxical obedience. Therefore, comparing our life situations to this story to discover idols in our lives will be misleading. Yes, there are passages in the Bible that teach resignation of creaturely goods for the sake of God—but this is not one of them. By bringing this story forward as paradigmatic, Dr. Keller confuses readers. If readers notice that God designated Isaac as the chosen instrument of the offspring promise, and yet Keller says that Abraham had to be willing to expect Isaac to remain dead, they might begin to believe that God does not keep to his word. Also, this depiction of the meaning of Genesis 22 leads us to expect Christianity to be in large part similar to Stoicism. For example, are there not similarities between this chapter from *Counterfeit Gods* and Marcus Aurelius's counsel that when you kiss your son goodnight you should tell yourself, "He may be dead by tomorrow?"[45]

Silentio makes; this is similar to our observation that for Keller the test is about love, whereas I have argued that it is about faith.

[42] Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 19.

[43] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 20.

[44] Cf. the critique of some of Augustine's thinking as resembling Stoicism in the chapter on "Charity" in C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (1960; repr. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), 120–22.

[45] This thought comes from Marcus Aurelius's famous *Meditations*, where he actually

Resignation is called for in the Bible—but not in all cases. Sometimes an object of love in our life is competing with God and we need to give it up; but it is not wrong in general to love God's good gifts. We need to practice careful discernment about what God expects us to resign based on principles from his Word. This chapter from *Counterfeit Gods* creates the danger that we will jump too quickly to the conclusion that resignation is called for in too many instances. I have personally witnessed Christians who have a desire for some end, but as soon as they experience any sort of difficulty in attaining it, conclude that it must be an "idol" that God is calling them to renounce. Perhaps it is. But perhaps that person should continue to seek that thing with persistent effort or patiently wait to receive it from the Lord. Who is to say? By portraying as an idol to be renounced something that Abraham was supposed to persistently hope for because of God's promise, I am afraid that Dr. Keller has encouraged his readers to default to resignation too quickly and too often.

In conclusion, there appears to be a tension that must be maintained in the question of self-denial and hopeful expectation. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus says,

> Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold *now in this time*, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, *with persecutions*, and in the age to come eternal life" (Mark 10:29–30; emphasis added).

Notice the juxtaposition—Jesus promises blessings "now in this time" (not solely in the age to come) and yet "with persecutions." How then should the God of the Bible be portrayed? From this study, we conclude that he should be seen as a Good Father, who *both* gives good gifts *and* calls his children to necessary self-denial. Further, as God is someone who will demand things from us, we must also teach people to believe in a God who is active in their present lives by Providence, gives good gifts, and even is a God who is "concerned about the smallest things."[46]

attributes the idea to Epictetus.

[46] Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 34.