

OpenTheo

An American Evangelist

April 18, 2023



Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

In this Episode, Kevin reads from his recent article for First Things, a response Collin Hansen's article about the life and ministry of Tim Keller.

Transcript

(upbeat music) Greetings and salutations. This is Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung and I want to read an article today that came out recently from First Things.

Let me give you a little background. This is a book review that I've written, but it's not at all a traditional book review several months ago. First Things contacted me and said they were thinking about reviewing one of Tim Keller's books, wanted to write an appreciative review for Tim, but not just thinking of a book, but of more broadly of Tim's ministry.

And they said, "What do you think about maybe somebody writing on his new book on forgiveness?" I said, "I think that's a really good idea, but do you know about this new book that Collin Hansen has written a kind of quasi-biography?" I said, "I think that's a great idea. I think that's a great idea. I think that's a great idea." I said, "I think that's a great idea.

I think that's a great idea." I said, "Well, thank you for asking. I'll think about it, but you need to know that this book by Collin Hansen called Timothy Keller, His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation." You need to know, "I'm good friends with Collin and I'm also good friends with Tim, and so it would be hard for me to write a dispassionate book review that's written by a friend about a friend." And they said, "That's great. That's not what we want you to do.

We don't want this a typical book review where you summarize the book and then you give some strengths and weaknesses. We want you to give a personal reflection." So you know both of them and give some stories, talk about not just this book, but use this as an opportunity to give some personal reflections about Keller's ministry more broadly.

And the aim was to write something largely appreciative, but they said, "Okay, we know you have some differences, so why don't you try to flesh out what some of those differences are?" So I said, "Okay, that's a tall order, but I think it's worthwhile." So I actually went to talk to Collin and Tim first, and I said, "You guys are friends.

I want you to know that I'm thinking about doing this. Are you okay with this? If you don't think it's a good idea or you don't want to see me do this, I won't do it?" And they both said, "No, that's a great idea. We'd love to have you reflect on the book." And Tim said, "I'd be happy for you to reflect on your broader sense of the book and also his own influence and to talk about some of our differences." And so that's the needle I was trying to thread in the task before me, not a traditional book review, but really using the book as a launching off place for these reflections.

So the article, at first things, is entitled "An American Evangelist," and it's about Collin Hansen's new book, Timothy Keller, whose spiritual and intellectual formation. I first met Tim Keller in April 2011 at a national conference for the Gospel Coalition, TGC, the Evangelical Renewal-Minded Organization Keller and Don Carson founded in 2005. About a month before the conference, Rob Bell released "Love Wins," a provocative, universalist-leaning book about Heaven, Hell, and the fate of every person who ever lived.

That's the subtitle. It's hard to believe now, but Bell, who left ministry to start a "spiritual talk show in Los Angeles," the same year "Love Wins" came out, used to be one of the most famous pastors in America. Hailed by some as "the next Billy Graham," Bell pastored Mars Hill Bible Church in suburban Grand Rapids just a few miles from where I grew up.

It started out as a mall. I remember going to this mall when I was a kid, and it wasn't much there. You'd go there on Saturday morning for baseball card shows.

And then Rob Bell planted this church out of a larger evangelical church in the Grand Rapids area, and then the church exploded in growth. With the church growing to more than 10,000 attendees and its innovative pastor in high demand as a speaker and author, Time Named Bell, one of the 100 most influential people in the world. Yes, the world.

His books and especially his popular Numa videos were staples in many evangelical churches. At the same time, I was pastoring in East Lansing, Michigan. This land seems about an hour and 15 minutes from Grand Rapids.

And that's not far from where Bell grew up. Bell, the son of a Reagan appointed district judge. Virtually every person at my church had visited Mars Hill or knew someone who attended Mars Hill.

When Rob Bell started pitching universalism to his mainstream evangelical audience, it was a big deal. A few weeks before the TGC Conference in 2011, I published a 20 page review of "Love Wins." I was slated to lead a panel at the conference with Keller and others on the theme, "God, Abounding in Love, Punishing the Guilty." I knew of Tim Keller, of course, everyone in my Reformed circles knew of Keller's thriving ministry in New York City. And of his 2008 bestseller, "The Reason for God," and then soon after that, "The Prodigal God," and many other best-selling books that followed.

I never met Keller before, but it was Keller who, thanks to some mutual friends, had helped me get an advanced copy of "Love Wins" so that I could have a lengthy review ready for publication as soon as the book was released. I wasn't sure, though, whether Tim was following the controversy carefully. Turns out he was, and I've since discovered that as much as Keller likes to stay out of the Internet fray, he's often very attuned to these online debates.

As Tim passed by me in the speaker's room, he said with a rye grin, "Well, if it isn't the mean Kevin Deum." I said also with a smile, something like, "And if it isn't the very nice Tim Keller." I've often thought about that initial exchange with Keller because this is something about our different approaches to ministry. Though I hope to be kind and careful, my public ministry has often involved correcting error guarding the truth and warning against creeping liberalism. By contrast, though Keller usually lands squarely on the traditional side of doctrinal matters, he has a public ministry focused on making the gospel attractive to outsiders, staying out of intramural theological disputes and warning against extremes.

You might say I specialize in building walls, and Keller specializes in building bridges. I'm sure Tim would affirm with me that both are necessary. I trust that many others will properly summarize and evaluate Colin Hansen's excellent book, Timothy Keller, His Spiritual Intellectual Formation.

It would be difficult for me to give a dispassionate analysis of a book written by a friend about a friend. What I can say, by way of unbiased evaluation, is that anyone remotely interested in Keller's life and ministry will have a hard time putting this book down. Hansen, with a degree in journalism from Northwestern University, an MDiv from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and more than ten years of experience working for TGC and directly with Keller, is ideally situated to write this book.

The page is quick, but with enough new information and personal anecdotes to repay the reader's attention. The tone is appreciative and sympathetic, but not hagiographical. The biographical approach is unusual.

It tells Keller's story by relating him to his mentors and friends, but still basically chronological and easy to follow. The book is not meant to be a traditional academic biography replete with secondary sources and intent on evaluating Keller's ideas, his

strengths, his weaknesses, and his place in the larger cultural and ecclesiastical trends of the 20th and 21st centuries. Instead, the book draws on interviews with its subject and with his friends and family to create a close-up portrait of Keller as an individual.

At times, I would have enjoyed hearing more of Hansen's authorial voice, his evaluation, and analysis of Keller's remarkable story. Given Hansen's reliance on Keller's own recollection, especially for the last few decades, I wondered at times whether the depiction of Keller from the 1970s or 1980s was being reinterpreted through the lens of Keller from the 2020s. For example, it is fair to ask whether Keller's explicit alignment in recent years with neo-Calvinism, the Orthodox yet modern vision from Dutch theologians Herman Bauvink and Abraham Kuiper, represents Keller's intellectual vision from the very beginning of his ministry, or his mature thought layered atop earlier instincts.

Nevertheless, Hansen's method allows the book to pursue its central theme, that you can't understand the later Keller, the pastor who arrives in New York City in 1989, becomes a renowned author and sees his church grow to upwards of 5,000 members without understanding the preceding 39 years of his life. In the first two-thirds of the book, we meet Tim Keller before New York City. Keller as a socially awkward boy growing up in a controlling and legalistic environment in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

Keller as a newly converted student committed to Interspersed Christian Fellowship at Bucknell University. Keller as a newly formed Calvinist at Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary. Keller as a novice pastor in Blue Collar, Hopewell, Virginia.

And Keller as a still intellectually developing professor at Westminster Theological Seminary. It can be tempting to think that successful men and women burst on to the scene de novo with revolutionary ideas all their own. But of course, that's never the case.

We are all shaped for good or ill, in concert with or in reaction to our parents, teachers, books, mentors, colleagues, friends, family members, and opponents. In Keller's case, there have been a host of influences. Barbara Boyd, R.C. Sproul, Roger Nicole, Richard Lovelace, Elizabeth Elliott, Jonathan Edwards, Herman Bauvink, J.R.R. Tolkien, Martin Lloyd Jones, John St. Harvey Cahn, Jack Miller, N.T. Wright, Charles Taylor, and three preeminent influences in particular.

C.S. Lewis, Ed Clowney, and Tim's wife, Kathy, Christy Keller. Reading Hansen's book helped me piece together why Tim and I get along so well and why we respectfully differ on some important points. Tim and I are both Northerners, both raised and schooled in the mid-Atlantic and in the mid-Atlantic and in the mid-Atlantic.

Serving in a Presbyterian denomination with deep southern roots, we've read almost all the same people and share some of the same heroes in ministry. For example, the Welsh pastor, Martin Lloyd Jones, who ministered during the middle part of the 20th century in

London's Westminster Chapel, has been a formative preaching influence for both of us. Crucially, both Tim and I attended Gordon Conwell Theological Seminary on Boston's North Shore.

Although Keller graduated in 1970, the first time he was born in the West, the first time he was born in the West. When I graduated in 1975 and I graduated a generation later in 2002, we encountered more than a few of the same people. I remember hearing the formidable and no-nonsense Elizabeth Elliot, a key mentor who helped push Tim and Kathy in a more conservative direction on women's ordination, speak in its seminary chapel toward the end of her life.

I was assisting in chapel that morning and had the harrowing experience of trying to free Elizabeth Elliot from behind a broken bathroom door, but that's a story for another time. I preached many times at the Orthodox Presbyterian Church I attended in front of the family of Gwyn Walters, the homiletics professor who gave Keller a "c" in preaching, but also instilled in him a Welsh emphasis on preaching to the heart. At the same church I attended a class taught by Meredith Klein, the groundbreaking Old Testament professor with whom Keller took six classes more than he took with any other professor.

I also took a course with Richard Lovelace, the beloved and absent-minded professor whose book, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, proved hugely influential for Keller. Like any public person, Keller has his share of detractors. Within our denomination, the conservative and Calvinistic Presbyterian Church in America, PCA, Keller is widely respected for his win some outreach to unbelievers, for his shrewdly contextual approach to ministry, and for talking about race, justice, and the poor, topics sometimes neglected in conservative circles.

Keller has also been criticized for those same things, with some arguing that he avoids unpopular doctrines in an effort to appeal to secular elites, is overly insistent on a sophisticated cultural hermeneutic, and is too quick to offer third-way solutions for social and political matters that sometimes require Christians to take sides and enter the fray. Keller is not always treated fairly. I've seen him face vitriol online for making ordinary Christian comments that shouldn't be controversial.

He was, for example, recently called "spiritually abusive" for insisting that Christians should try to read the Bible each year. Tim Keller is not what's wrong with the world or the church. It is no small thing that one of the most widely respected pastors of the past 25 years is a Bible-believing, five-point Calvinist, who holds that abortion is wrong, that marriage is between a man and a woman, and that only qualified men should be ordained to church office.

At the same time, Keller is probably center left within the PCA, whereas I am center right. As much as I give thanks for Keller, I often find myself sizing up our cultural moment and approaching ministry in a somewhat different way. Let me mention four

differences that became clearer to me as I read Hanson's book.

First, Keller is attuned to the dangers of legalism, whereas I am more attuned to the perils of liberalism. This difference likely is something to do with how we each grew up. Tim in a familial and ecclesiastical environment that seemed effort-driven and graceless, and I, before switching to the PCA, in a mainline denomination that has been drifting toward doctrinal, latitudinal, latitudinal, latitudinalism for more than 50 years.

I don't think there are quite as many fighting fundamentalists out there as Keller thinks, nor that he always deals with fundamentalism barely, in my opinion. And he probably thinks I underappreciate how dangerous overly conservative churches can be. Let me explain why Richard Lovelace's dynamics of spiritual life, with its focus on the history of revivals and the need for the church to be constantly renewed, has been one of Keller's most recommended resources.

I enjoyed my one course with Lovelace, but I didn't find his book "seminal to my thinking and way of doing ministry," like Keller said. I wouldn't say with Keller that his class "changed my life." Second, because Keller's initial conversion and growth as a Christian came through paratured ministry, most notably "Inversity at Bucknell," Keller often sees the church as, however unintentionally, getting in the way of dynamic outreach and as in need of systemic reform. In Hansen's words, Keller "brought Inversity's instincts with him into the local church." Since Intersivity's ministry, though broadly evangelical, was intended for college students from all backgrounds, it "taught him to value what Christians hold in common over the doctrines that divide them." While teaching at Westminster Theological Seminary, Keller was an elder at New Life Presbyterian Church, where Pastor Jack Miller stressed grace, acceptance, and freedom from calcified church patterns and status quo structures.

Keller made Miller's book "Outgrowing the Ingrown Church," required reading for every original core group member at Redeemer Presbyterian Church. In the congregation he founded in New York City in 1989, I've benefited from that book, too. I have read it, and my elders read it at my previous church.

But in 2023, even the most outward-facing church is going to face hostility not of its own making. I fear that anxious evangelicals hope that if they can just be grace-centered enough, contextualize enough, do enough to serve the community and make clear that they are not Republicans, then unbelievers will turn to Christ. As Keller never makes such an outlandish claim, but when we emphasize, sometimes necessarily, the church's failure to adapt to a changing world, we can miss the biblical truth that those who hated Jesus will hate his followers, John 15:18, and that the God of his age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, 2 Corinthians 4:4.

Third, Keller has often made use of George Morrison's observation that the Reformed tradition in America comprises three different priorities, or "impulses," the doctrinalist

impulse, which emphasizes confessions of the church and correct theology, the pietist impulse, which emphasizes right behavior and the internal affections of the heart, and the culturalist impulse, which emphasizes collective action in the external work of the church to transform society. Keller has acknowledged before that he is a culturalist first, then a pietist, then a doctrinalist. I would say that my order is just the opposite.

In fact, if it's not too doctrinalist of me, I think that sound doctrine is more than an impulse, it is foundational and indispensable for the other two emphases. While I'm at it, I might as well say that I'm not convinced that the culture transforming agenda belongs to the church-quat church, nor that it won't end up being co-opted by an ever-expanding list of "the church of the church." Finally, Keller and I differ in that I consider myself reformed and then evangelical, whereas he seems to be evangelical and then reformed. This difference of emphasis should not be exaggerated.

After all, many Reformed Christians don't want the label evangelical at all, and many evangelicals would endear call themselves reformed. But it matters. I think of myself as a Reformed Christian who can appreciate what is good about broader evangelicalism, rather than an evangelical "in the church of the church." Rather than an evangelical with Reformed theology.

I asked Hanson while he was writing the book. Is Keller basically a "died in the wool Presbyterian" who is willing to bend and nuance things because he wants to reach the lost? Or is he basically a big tenty evangelical with enough Reformed sensibilities to keep him tethered to good theology? Hanson replied, "Oh, definitely the second." Hanson suggests that for Keller, the old Princeton tradition of Charles Hodge, up through J. Gresham-Macon, "emphasize the closed fist of theological orthodoxy." I'm more appreciative of the Princeton tradition in their early Westminster successors than Tim is, and he's more appreciative of Kuiper and Neo-Calvinism. I take my cues from Calvin, Turret and Maitian and Murray first, then add 20th-century British evangelicals to keep me from being too narrow.

I think Tim takes his cues from those British evangelicals first, but reads enough Calvin, Turret and Maitian and Murray to keep him well-grounded. Keller and I both went to Gordon Conwell, one of many post-war institutions that came together thanks to Billy Graham's convening power, and with his uniquely weighty endorsement. As a result, Gordon Conwell also embodied Graham's Neo-Evangelical approach, a somewhat Reformed theology, standing apart from fundamentalism, and also against liberalism.

Keller attended Gordon Conwell from 1972 to 1975 when the seminary was on the rise. By the time I arrived in 1999, the school was still strong, but just about to start losing money and students as the Neo-Evangelical consensus fell apart. This fact may speak to why Tim and I are wired differently.

The conservative critics of Keller, and by the way, there are many liberals who strongly

disagree with Keller's conservative views on issues of gender and sexuality, just ask Princeton Theological Seminary, which revoked Keller's Kuiper prize a number of years ago. He might wish some conservative views, some conservative critics might wish that he were clear on certain cultural issues less friendly toward evolutionary theory, and less dismissive of conservatism as a moral philosophy. For my part, I'm grateful that one of the most influential Christians in the English-speaking world is an Orthodox evangelical confessional Presbyterian.

Tim and I served on the PCA's Sexuality Study Committee, where we were tasked with writing a final draft, or rather a first draft, of the main section of the report. It wasn't hard for Tim and me to land on the same theology, sometimes pulling in different directions and sensitive to different concerns, but always coming to the same conclusions. I'm also thankful for the personal Tim Keller, who comes through in the book.

As long as I've known Tim, he has always been kind, considerate, and candid with me. As with the Gospels he preaches, I've found Keller consistently gracious and generous. He continues to battle cancer, he would say the fight is against sin more than against cancer, with honesty, with faith, and with good cheer.

In an age of pastoral primadanas and celebrity preachers who get worse the closer you look, Keller is refreshingly down to earth and unpretentious. In some ways I imagine he's the same drum major loves to talk about what he's reading, Tolkien nerd he was in early adulthood. This is surely one of the secrets to his success.

Self-aware and comfortable in his own skin, Keller shows no need to clamor for attention, to defend himself against every critic, or to require fans and sycophants to stroke his ego. If you've seen Keller preach or teach or speak on a panel, you've seen the real person. Tim Keller is what you think he is, except all.

In one sense not everyone can do what Keller does, he has a special knack for synthesizing what he reads, which is a lot, and using that knowledge to present the claims of Christ in a compelling way to secular people. There is much about Keller, his gifts, his success, his context, that is unique. But in the end I believe his legacy will be found in those areas and in those ideas that are least unique.

I believe Keller's best books, the books that will help the most people over the longest period of time, are not those on apologetics or ministry methodology, but those dealing with evergreen issues of the Christian life, prayer, suffering, forgiveness, marriage, reading the Psalms, the idols of the human heart, the dangers of license and legalism. Tim Keller's ministry is to have lasting influence, more biographies are to be written in the years ahead, it will be because he has done the ordinary things extraordinarily well. He has extolled the gospel of God's free grace, lived a faithful Christian life, and taught people the Bible in a way they can understand.

Those are the things Keller learned in his spiritual and intellectual formation, and those are the most important things we can learn from him.

[Music]