

BOOK REVIEW

Timothy Keller:
His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation

by Collin Hansen

Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 2023, 320 pages

Collin Hansen's spiritual and intellectual biography is a superbly written insight into the life and thought of the recently deceased Tim Keller. Keller was most known for his 2008 bestselling *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, and for establishing Redeemer Presbyterian Church, one of the most influential churches in America. Located in the heart of secular Manhattan, Redeemer catered to young professionals in their 20s and 30s. As I read Hansen's book, I thought of how, although he was fairly well-known in Christian circles, it's unfortunate that Keller did not have more of an impact on American society in general to counter the manner in which Christianity is being perceived in the era of Donald Trump and the evangelical leaders who support him. In such works as *Generous Justice: How God's Grace Makes Us Just* (2010), *Center Church: Doing Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (2012), *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering* (2013), *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (2016), *Hope in Times of Fear: The Resurrection and the Meaning of Easter* (2021), and a number of other books, Keller offered a version of Christianity that is far closer to what Christianity should be about, not what is being espoused by MAGA hat-wearing Christians who follow the lead of Trump.

To put it simply, Evangelical Christianity is getting a bad name. In the eyes of the general public, it's associated with Christian nationalism, white supremacy, book banning, discrimination against homosexuality, and numerous other issues in an ongoing cultural war. Two years ago in this journal, I reviewed the book *So Many Christians, So Few Lions: Is There Christianophobia in the United States* by George Yancey and David A. Williamson, who found evidence of a condition they described as Christianophobia ("an unreasonable hatred of conservative Christians") that was prevalent among well-educated Americans. Yancey and Williamson even had a chapter on dehumanization (seeing an outgroup as non-human.). With the passage of time, this attitude is even more evident today.

Keller wanted to change the version of Christian Evangelicalism presented in the media to a “middle space between fundamentalism and liberalism” (39). Hansen’s biography is a stark reminder that someone who could have helped change the public perception of what Christianity stands for (considering how Christianity is pictured in the mainstream media) is no longer with us. An opportunity has been lost, and unfortunately there is no American Christian intellectual alive today who has had any real influence on public discourse. Indeed, in my view, there has not been an American Christian intellectual of any stature since Reinhold Niebuhr. But that is another issue.

We’re living in polarizing times where millions of Evangelical Christians follow Donald Trump, someone who uses Christianity for his own political and monetary purposes, and who as I write this is under indictment for ninety-one felony charges in four different jurisdictions. And those who are touted as Christian leaders, who are well-known to the public such as Franklin Graham, James Dobson, and Ralph Reed, still support Trump. In fact, there is even a national group called “Pastors for Trump.” As someone who believes that ethics and morality have a role in politics, I am appalled at what’s happening. A Libertarian economist friend of mine tells me I’m suffering from Trump Derangement Syndrome (TDS), and perhaps he’s right. I struggle daily with trying to make sense of how people who profess being Christian can follow someone who not only held the Bible upside down for a photo opportunity, but also inverts just about all of what that Bible teaches. How can evangelicals who attended a recent Conservative Political Action Pac (CPAC) not be publicly outraged at the golden statue of Trump on display there? I confess that I am biased against Trump, but in my defense, I can honestly say I have never met a Christian who believes Trump is a moral and ethical person. A large segment of evangelicals has simply abandoned Christian ethical and moral principles for what C.S. Lewis called the “magician’s bargain: give up our soul, get power in return” (1944:75).

Having said the above, it’s clear to me that the antidote needed for “Trumpism” is “Kellerism.” What then is “Kellerism? Keller sought to reshape evangelicalism into a Christianity that appealed to people’s deepest inclinations, proclivities which “did not fit the secular view of the world—intuitions about moral truth, human value, and the reality of both love and beauty. It means to expose the secular culture’s idolatry of prosperity and power, even as we admit the church’s own failure to operate on the basis of love and generosity” (164). For Keller, the church had to admit its historic failures if it were to live by Biblical principles, specifically, the inherent dignity of every human being (*imago dei*), love for opponents, care for the suffering, and justice for those everywhere oppressed. The role of the Church is not to align itself with power, but to provoke the powerful, while still serving society’s spiritual needs. This is

necessary if we are to move beyond the contentiousness now existing between the “Church” and large segments of American society. To invoke the oft-used Quaker phrase, there is a need for someone or some institution to “speak truth to power.” Given Keller is no longer with us, there is a real void in the public square.

Keller resisted tying the church to one political agenda, and yet this is what has happened. It is bad enough that Christianity is being pitted against secularism, but there are too many instances where Christians are pitted against each other. We have Fundamentalists not speaking to Red Letter Christians, and family members disowning relatives over political issues—so much of which can be traced to what has been labeled “The Big Lie.” What is missing is what Keller stood for—the inherent dignity of the human being. Christ called us to love each other, and by whoring after power, so many Evangelicals have lost sight of what it means to be a Christian. The passing of Keller was a heartbreaking loss, but the fact that no one is ready to take his place in the public square is a societal tragedy. Tim Keller left a legacy of what it meant to be a Christian. We should never lose sight of it. What should always bind us together is the image of Christ on the cross, the power of love, not the love of power.

Reference

Lewis, C. S. 1944. *The Abolition of Man*. New York: Harper-Collins.

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