

**“The Decline and Renewal of the American Church: Part 2 – The Decline of Evangelicalism” by Tim Keller, *Life in the Gospel*, Winter 2022.**

In this second of Keller’s four essays on the *decline* of church life in America, and his musings on its *renewal*, the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church (PCA) in New York City focuses on *Evangelicalism*. His first essay was on the *Mainline* church (reviewed in EC’s [Review, Vol 47, No 1](#)).

Noting the decline of late 20<sup>th</sup> century Mainline Protestantism and a rising attraction to Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism, Keller notes that, “the liberal theology and politics of the mainline, alienated the more conservative U.S. population. ... By the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, about 30% of Americans identified as ‘born again’ evangelicals.” But, “since 2007”, he notes, “evangelicalism has begun its own decline.” He sees that “all indications are that in the coming years an unprecedented number of younger Americans will be leaving churches and institutional religion of all kinds behind.”

Reminding us of, “*the political polarization of culture and church*”, Keller observes that, “People look for religion substitutes such as politics. The two U.S. political parties have changed into almost uniform Left-wing and Right-wing groupings. The mainline church aligned tightly with the Left and evangelicals with the Right.” He well understands, this was a “weakening [of] the church’s credibility in the broader culture”, not to mention, a crass assault on biblical theology. This twist turned off evangelicals who did not buy into the Religious Right’s crusades.

Keller itemizes “two basic features of Secularization” as, “privatization of religion” and “radical individualism”. He calls it, “the emancipated self that must be free to determine its own moral choices”. But, don’t *all* Christians and *all* secularists *determine their own moral choices*, many *at odds* with their *fellow* Christians and *fellow* secularists? One evangelical follows *his* understanding of a Bible text while disagreeing with *an* equally devout and theologically educated evangelical’s following *his*. This is, *itself*, the story of *evangelical* church history, and all church history. It’s what prevents, *e.g.*, evangelical Methodists from being ordained in the evangelical PCA, and *vice versa*. How else can one explain all the *many interpretations*, even completely *contradictory* interpretations, of so many *biblical texts* among honestly intelligent, equally educated and seriously devout evangelicals? It’s unfair to dismiss *all* of this as “privatization of religion” or as “radical individualism”.

Disparaging what he mocks as “the therapeutic view of the self”, Keller claims that, “The sexual revolution comes from the belief that sexual expression is central to an authentic identity.” But, of course, *it is* – *along with* all the other aspects of authentic human identity. What he may have in mind in this criticism of *others* is *not* “sexual expression”, *per se*, which is something “central to an authentic identity”, as it surely is in *his* genuinely loving and sexually expressed marriage with his wife, of which he’s rightly expressed his genuine gratitude. But, in the equally authentic identity of a loving *same-sex* marriage, the two no more *chose their sexual orientations* than Keller and his wife *chose their sexual orientations*. *All discover within themselves*, their *given* sexual orientation, then fall *involuntarily* into romance, but may *willingly*

commit to monogamy. Of course, sadly, too many of both sexual orientations *aren’t committed to monogamy*.

Keller unreasonably generalizes that, “the Christian sex ethic became successfully branded as unreasonable (an ideal no one can live up to), as well as psychologically unhealthy and oppressive.”. But *monogamy* is *crucial* for really true intimacy in *both* heterosexual couples *and* homosexual couples. But, demanding, as Keller’s PCA does, that those of *same-sex orientation* either remain celibate or marry someone of the *other* sexual orientation *is, indeed*, “unreasonable (an ideal no one can live up to)”.

It’s rather odd that Keller claims: “*The sexual revolution* comes from the belief that sexual expression is central to an authentic identity”, as if the Creator never declared, “It is *not good* for this human to be *alone*. I will make a helper *suitable* for him.” (Gen 2:18) To be *suitable* after the *creation* of the *first human* required *another human*, not only for *intimate companionship*, but, *that* other human needed to be a *woman for propagating* humanity. The Creator’s *suitable* gift to Adam was Eve, to meet *his need for closest companionship* that none of the other animals could provide, and, to produce children for the continuation of the race. Adam was thrilled that this gift was so recognizably familial, “*bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*”. (Gen 2:23) Today, the most satisfied couples of *either* sexual orientation replicate Adam’s *joy*, in a *partner*, – and it’s still so very much more about *that specific person* than it is about *mere body parts!*

Neither heterosexual nor homosexual couples *chose their sexual orientation*. Some of each orientation are monogamous and others are promiscuous. The *monogamous* couples of *either* orientation find true freedom and true love; the promiscuous of *either* orientation don’t find true freedom and true love, for such isn’t found in futile fantasies.

Keller sees, “*the primacy, but insufficiency of the theological marks for defining evangelicalism*.” He grants, the basics are: “An experience of grace and conversion, the realization of the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice, the knowledge of the power of the living Word of the Scripture – these all bind us together across the cultural and social differences. And yet”, based in his *worldwide experience*, “once we begin to seek to work together, we find that our social-cultural differences are not insignificant, that they often intrude and disrupt our work. Yet, we labor to overcome the cultural differences, because we perceive them as less fundamental to who we are as Christians.”

Would that he understood, that one’s *sexual orientation* is *not* subject to change, while *cultural orientations* are. But, when he became a Christian in college in the ‘60s, would he have wanted to be told that he must either be celibate for life, change his sexual orientation or marry a man in order to be a Christian? Would he be who he is today?

