

## “The Decline and Renewal of the American Church: Part 1 – The Decline of the Mainline” by Tim Keller, *Life in the Gospel*, Fall 2021.

**T**his first of four articles by Keller is to be followed by, “The Decline of Faith”, “The Path to Renewal”, and “The Power for Renewal”, concluding in summer, 2022. He founded New York City’s Redeemer Presbyterian Church, and is the most popular preacher in his evangelical denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America.

In this essay, he says, “virtually everyone agrees that something is radically wrong with the church.” Yes. Yet, his adding that, “there is more polarization and conflict than ever”, is a bit of exaggeration in the 500<sup>th</sup> year of Luther’s *death-defying protest in defense* of Reformation at Worms, followed by Zwingli’s Protest (1522), and Calvin’s (1530) and the fact that Keller’s PCA denomination is the *result* of very severe doctrinal controversies and multiple church splits in the early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century.

He asserts: “Some do not see any way forward for the church at all.” “Oh, ye of little faith!”, was Jesus’ rebuke before rebuking the *winds and the waves*. (Matt 8:26) Keller notes that secularists want to “empty the pews”. But Jesus promised, “I will build my church; and even the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matt 16:18)

Keller says that, “in 1952, a record 75% of Americans said that religion was ‘very important’ in their lives”. In 1952, Keller was 2-years-old. I was 13, and *I saw* that this *mainline* church attendance was simply, “the expected way to spend” Sunday mornings. It was *not* about the Gospel. Sociologists later dismissed it all as merely “civic religion”.

I *did* hear the Gospel from my Sunday School teacher, but *not* from the pastor, though in 1952, my siblings and I were “confirmed” there. My parents moved us to yet another mainline church because of its bigger youth group. And I heard *no* Gospel there, *either* in Sunday School *or* in the church services. So, I stayed home on Sunday mornings to listen to *Gospel preaching on radio*. On Sunday evenings, I led our church youth group and then, on our way to get dessert, we’d listen to Billy Graham on the car radio.

In 1955, I found a Bob Jones University catalog in my public high school library and I liked what I read. In 1956, I enrolled at BJU and, of course, it was a *mixed-bag*. I was soon summoned to a confrontation with Dr. Bob, Sr., and several deans, as he shouted his rage at me. An hour before, I’d been overheard *defending Billy Graham* against BJU’s opposing his “compromising with Modernists”! Someone tattled. After two years, as per my family’s plan, I transferred to a state university in my home state of Ohio.

Keller says church attendance in those late ‘50s included nearly half of all Americans, “the highest percentage in U.S. history”. But, *again, what did it all really mean?*

He admits that, “by the mid-1970s, ... most of the major church groups had stopped growing and begun to shrink ... reversing a trend of two centuries.” *No wonder!* And, he notes that most theologically conservative churches were growing. *No wonder!*

Citing liberal warnings that churches as “political organizations would see continued decline”, Keller rightly recognizes that later “conservatives” *failed* to heed that warning.

He mentions the fine contributions of J. Gresham Machen and George Marsden. He cites Machen’s putting it so well: “To have faith in Christ means to cease trying to win God’s favor by one’s own character, the man who believes in Christ simply accepts the

sacrifice which Christ offered on Calvary. ...Very different is the conception of faith which prevails in the liberal church.” Sadly, Keller’s opposition to same-sex couples fabricates beyond Machen’s biblical view. Sadly, too, the *liberal* church, in contrast to Machen’s view, offers *little else but, politically correct* “support” of LGBTQQ agendas, with rainbow flags flying over the front doors and rainbow-draped clerics at the altars. What *else* do liberals have to offer, having abandoned the biblical truth of the Gospel?

Sadly, Keller *distracts* himself and all by *opposing same-sex* couples, contrary to EC’s 1975 founding, with our first *endorsement* from the founding president of PCA’s college and seminary, Bob Rayburn. EC keynoters and supporters have included Jim Rayburn III, son of Bob’s brother, Jim, the founder of Young Life, Eugenia Price, Ros Rinker, Ray McAfee, Marten H. Woudstra, Harry R. Boer, Hendrik Hart, Val Clear, Walt Hearn, Walden Howard, Paul King Jewett, Kay Lindskoog, Cynthia Clawson, Daniel Dobson, Stephen A. Hayner, Hal Ellens, Don Dayton, Jack Rogers, Philip Yancey, Jeanne Hanson, Marsha Stevens, Nelson Gonzales, Chuck Smith, Jr., Ken Medema, Tom Key, Ron Drummond, Nancy Hardesty, Reta Halteman Finger, John F. Alexander, Amy Plantinga Pauw, Peggy and Tony Campolo, Justin Lee, Craig Detweiler, Lew Smedes, Roy Clements, Fisher Humphreys, David G. Myers, Jane R. Dickie, David Augsburg, Letha Dawson Scanzoni, Todd Komarnicki, Charlie Shedd, Nicholas Wolterstorff, et al. So, Tim Keller’s quarrel over homosexuality is with *these evangelicals*, too, as well as with C. S. Lewis, a dedicated defender of homosexuals, decades before EC’s founding.

Keller says, “Everyone had assumed that secular, pragmatic, common sense reasoning would come to an agreement on social mores. When that failed, there was no court of appeal or rationale available in any discussion of moral values.” Yet, across all of world history, there’s been a version of Jesus’ command, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” (Cf. Matt 22: 35-40). How do Keller and the PCA *not* see *this* as the *pragmatic guide* for dealing with those who, by *no choice or fault of theirs, discover their* sexuality just as, and when, heterosexuals discover *theirs*. Tim and Kathy Keller and other loving couples meet *their needs* for a life partner of the *other* sex as others meet, or wish to meet, a life partner of the *same-sex*. It’s no more complicated than one’s extrapolating from one’s own needs to another’s needs. In other words, a no-brainer.

Evangelical “ex-gay” efforts ended tragically, as did secularists’ “open-relationships”. How many more must flounder without any *honest, practical* support from *evangelical* or *liberal* churches? How many more will wind up dead after being forced into hidden lives of promiscuity? How many more broken families, including innocent kids, must suffer from being *forced into mixed-orientation* marriages? When will evangelicals begin to *obey*, let alone, *intuit*, The Golden Rule of lovingly extrapolating empathically from *one’s own needs to others’ needs?*

