



Faculty Work Comprehensive List

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6-1-2023

## In Gratitude for Tim Keller (1950-2023)

Justin Bailey

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## In Gratitude for Tim Keller (1950-2023)

### Abstract

"The primary purpose of preaching is to give people an encounter with the beauty of Jesus Christ."

Posting about the influence of Tim Keller from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/in-gratitude-for-tim-keller-1950-2023/>

### Keywords

In All Things, Timothy Keller, gratitude, preaching, ministry

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

# In gratitude for Tim Keller (1950-2023)

Justin Ariel Bailey

**June 1, 2023**

Tim Keller passed away on Friday, May 19, 2023. I cried when I learned about it. This is my tribute, in gratitude for his ministry.

I first heard about Tim Keller about 20 years ago, during my first year in seminary. To contextualize the connection, I have to start with John Piper. I caught the Piper wave during college (finished in 2002) imbibing Piper's passion for "the supremacy of God in all things." I could pull off a pretty good Piper imitation when I preached (for a long time, I could quote the famous "collecting shells" sermon word-for-word). I read everything that he wrote and listened to all the sermons I could find.

I remain deeply thankful for that season of life. The big vision of God that Piper manifested was exactly what I needed as I was emerging from a narrower stream of Christianity. I've tried to hold on to the best of what I gained, even as I've moved on in many ways.

One problem was that my appropriation of Piper began to feel thin and manufactured, a matter of vocal inflection and emotional intensity. The style was ill-fitting with my own personality, my context in an immigrant church, and the diverse, urban youth group I was leading. My efforts as a Piper-clone were well-intentioned, occasionally effective, but not sustainable.

It was at this point that I came across Tim Keller. Somehow, I found myself on a website that had recordings of the Q&A time that he hosted after his sermons. His ability to give thoughtful, concise, theologically robust, imaginative, and gentle answers astounded me. The strategy was not blowing away with bluster, but inviting people to consider the beauty, goodness, and truth of the gospel. It resonated with me so deeply, and still does.

I know that in the early days of following Keller I made the same mistake. I tried to become a Keller-clone. But early on I remember hearing him say something like, if you just listen to one or two voices, you will become a clone; but if you listen to many voices, you will develop your own voice. At a certain point, I realized that the Lord was not asking me to be another Keller but to learn from Keller how to be more like myself.

My guess is I've only listened to 20 or so of Keller's sermons and have only read 4-5 of his books. (That's probably more than most but less than a true Keller fan.) And yet, Keller's ministry has marked me more than any other public figure. The things I learned from him

shaped my preaching and my practice of ministry so deeply, and I'm sure it would take a long time to relate all of it.

Here's the most important thing I learned: the primary purpose of preaching is to give people an encounter with the beauty of Jesus Christ. I often joke that I only have one sermon, but it's a pretty good one. It's a paraphrase of something I heard Keller say about redemptive-historical preaching. Every sermon ends at the same place, with the good news of Jesus, *looking at* Jesus. This means that no matter the text, there should be good news (not good advice) at the end. As he once said, if they're taking notes at the beginning, that's fine. But if they're taking notes at the end, I've failed. Because at the end of the sermon we should be worshiping, standing in awe of the beauty of Jesus. That remains my goal for every single sermon I preach.

I never met Tim Keller in person. I had a chance to meet him about 10 years ago through a friend who was hosting him, but I declined. I regret it now; I'm not sure why I didn't want to meet him. I think part of it was that I didn't want to feel like our relationship was celebrity-fan. I tried to get him my most recent book a couple of years ago, but of course given his declining health it was a long shot. I'll always wonder whether he ever read either of my books, which I feel are resonant with his own approach. (I sort of doubt it; he's on record as not being a big fan of George MacDonald.)

Nevertheless, I think there is something beautiful about being one of many who never got to meet him, but who would not be the same without the life he offered to the Lord.

I often labor over the words I write and the life I lead. I sometimes despair that my words and my life will simply fall to ground and be forgotten. I am sobered by the knowledge that this will happen to all of us, including our heroes. Whether we are famous or obscure, within a few generations, most of what we do will be forgotten.

And yet.

And yet, the gospel tells me that it's ok to fall to the ground and be forgotten. Because God sees us, knows us, remembers us, and reserves the right to raise us up again. And our good Lord takes things that fall to the ground – including our words and our lives – and he plants them. Like seeds they miraculously bear fruit, and bring about a harvest of righteousness we never could have imagined.

One person plants the seed, another person waters, but God alone is the one who makes things grow. Glory to his name.

*Loving God, thank you for the life and ministry of Tim Keller. Help us to continue on in the same way. Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayers.*