

# TIMOTHY KELLER

His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation

COLLIN  
HANSEN

 ZONDERVAN  
REFLECTIVE

ZONDERVAN REFLECTIVE

*Timothy Keller*

Copyright © 2023 by Collin Hansen

Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, 3900 Sparks Dr. SE, Grand Rapids, Michigan 49546

Zondervan titles may be purchased in bulk for educational, business, fundraising, or sales promotional use. For information, please email [SpecialMarkets@Zondervan.com](mailto:SpecialMarkets@Zondervan.com).

ISBN 978-0-310-12868-7 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-0-310-12871-7 (international trade paper edition)

ISBN 978-0-310-12870-0 (audio)

ISBN 978-0-310-12869-4 (ebook)

Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are taken from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®). Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Any internet addresses (websites, blogs, etc.) and telephone numbers in this book are offered as a resource. They are not intended in any way to be or imply an endorsement by Zondervan, nor does Zondervan vouch for the content of these sites and numbers for the life of this book.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

*Cover design: Micah Kandros Design*

*Cover photo: © Arianne Ramaker*

*Interior design: Sara Colley*

*Printed in the United States of America*

---

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 /LSC/ 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*To my grandfather, William,  
who proclaimed the gospel before me,  
and to my son, William,  
who will proclaim the gospel after me, I pray.*



# CONTENTS

*Preface* ..... xi

## **Part 1: Honest to God (1950 to 1972)**

1. Mom Competition  
*Allentown, Pennsylvania* ..... 3

2. The Absurd Man  
*Bucknell University* ..... 11

3. The Woman Who Taught Him to Study the Bible  
*InterVarsity Christian Fellowship* ..... 29

4. Kathy the Valiant  
*Kathy Kristy* ..... 41

5. True Myth  
*The Inklings* ..... 52

6. Doubters Welcome  
*R. C. Sproul and Ligonier Valley Study Center* ..... 59

## **Part 2: Professors and Peers (1972 to 1975)**

7. Theological Smorgasbord  
*Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary* ..... 69

8. Table Talk  
*Elisabeth Elliot and the Robins* ..... 75

9. Disagree without Being Disagreeable  
*Roger Nicole and Neo-Calvinism* ..... 88

10. Pneumodynamics  
*Richard Lovelace and Jonathan Edwards* ..... 93

### Part 3: Trial by Fire (1975 to 1989)

11. Chemical Capital of the South <i>Hopewell, Virginia</i> .....	107
12. Unfolding Drama <i>Edmund P. Clowney</i> .....	128
13. “Moulded by the Gospel” <i>Westminster Theological Seminary</i> .....	147

### Part 4: From Gotham to Globe (1989 to Present)

14. Masters of the Universe <i>New York City</i> .....	179
15. Land of Yes <i>Redeemer Presbyterian Church</i> .....	196
16. Everybody Worships <i>September 11 and The Reason for God</i> .....	221
17. Making Sense of God <i>Dogwood Fellowship</i> .....	237
18. Rings on a Tree <i>Conclusion</i> .....	263
Epilogue .....	267
Postscript .....	269
<i>Acknowledgments</i> .....	271
<i>Index</i> .....	273
<i>Notes</i> .....	283

# PREFACE

When he walks out the door, the first ten thousand people he sees will have no idea who he is.”

That’s how Kathy Keller described her husband, Tim, walking down the sidewalks in New York. Tim’s longtime assistant Craig Ellis has walked with him on countless streets in New York, and they’ve ridden together on innumerable subway rides. No one ever recognizes Keller.<sup>1</sup> It’s not like Tim Keller blends into the crowd. Standing six foot four with a bald crown, he’s one of the few people you’ll see walking down the street reading an open book.

He’s more likely to be recognized in London than in New York, where he has lived for more than thirty years. When Billy Graham hosted evangelistic meetings in New York in 1957, Graham sought publicity through association with the rich and famous to build a bigger platform for preaching the gospel. When Tim Keller started Redeemer Presbyterian Church in 1989, he deliberately avoided publicizing the church, especially to other Christians.<sup>2</sup> He wanted to meet skeptics of religion on the Upper East Side more than he wanted to sell books in Nashville. Whether they visited occasionally or joined as members, celebrities such as Jane Pauley, Elisabeth Hasselbeck, Robin Williams, and Diane Sawyer discovered a church that wouldn’t exploit their fame to garner attention.

## PREFACE

So why write about someone so uninterested in publicity? Because it's not really about him. Unlike a traditional biography, this book tells Keller's story from the perspective of his influences, more than his influence. Spend any time around Keller and you'll learn that he doesn't enjoy talking about himself. But he does enjoy talking—about what he's reading, what he's learning, what he's seeing.

The story of Tim Keller is the story of his spiritual and intellectual influences—from the woman who taught him how to read the Bible, to the professor who taught him to preach Jesus from every text, to the sociologist who taught him to see beneath society's surface.

With free access to Keller's family, friends, and colleagues, we visit the childhood home where he battled wits with bullies. We return to the small Southern church where he learned to care for souls. And we explore the city that lifted him to the international fame he never wanted. A child of the 1960s, student in the 1970s, church planter in the 1980s, and leader of one of New York's largest churches on September 11, 2001, Tim Keller's life spans many of the last century's most tumultuous events.

This is the story of the people, the books, the lectures, and ultimately the God who formed Timothy James Keller.

PART ONE

# HONEST TO GOD

1950 to 1972



## ONE

# MOM COMPETITION

*Allentown, Pennsylvania*

1950 to 1968

Tim Keller's grandmother forbade her two sons from fighting in World War II. One son's fiancée was so ashamed that she broke off the engagement when he registered as a conscientious objector. The other son, William Beverly Keller, met his wife in the violent men's ward of a mental institution.

William, known as Bill Keller, always loved to tell the story that way. Louise Anne Clemente worked as a nurse, and Bill needed to fulfill his draft service. When they were both twenty-two, they married in Wilmington, Delaware, on May 24, 1947. The marriage between Keller and Clemente represented changing social norms across the United States following World War II. As young couples married across religious and ethnic lines, they upended denominational loyalties and contributed to the growth of an evangelical movement. The Kellers'

## HONEST TO GOD

oldest child would be baptized as a Roman Catholic, confirmed as a Lutheran, enrolled in seminary as a Wesleyan Arminian, and ordained as a Presbyterian.

Bill Keller was born in 1924 in Quakertown, Pennsylvania. His mother came under the influence of Mennonite pacifists in the area. A teetotaler who loathed the policies and programs of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, she belonged to the Church of God (Holiness). The Keller family, however, claimed several veterans of the American Revolution in their family history. The first Keller in America brought his wife and four children to Philadelphia from Baden, Germany, in 1738. They settled down to farm in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and built their lives around the Lutheran church and school. For two hundred years, generations of Kellers didn't stray far from home.

Meanwhile, Tim Keller's Clemente grandfather, James, was born in 1880 near Naples, Italy, and came to America at age eighteen. His Clemente grandmother was born to Italian immigrants in the United States, just before the turn of the twentieth century. Her parents arranged the marriage.<sup>1</sup> When Bill Keller and Louise Clemente wed in 1947, they were required to hold the ceremony in the priest's home instead of at the church, because Bill was a Lutheran. Louise never forgave what she perceived as a slight. She had her eldest son baptized Catholic, but she left the church and raised her children as Lutherans.

Louise gave birth to Timothy James Keller in Allentown, Pennsylvania, on September 23, 1950. Bill taught art in a small school district south of Allentown, and they lived in an apartment. Bill didn't enjoy the work and abandoned teaching for a career in advertising so that he could provide a more stable income for his family. He began designing kitchens for Sears. The family moved into Allentown and built a new house across the street from Bill's parents, on a plot that had been Grandmom Keller's garden. Bill Keller eventually took a job with a retail store called Hess Brothers and climbed the corporate ladder from advertising manager to sales promotion manager. As an executive, Bill spent long hours

## MOM COMPETITION

out of the home away from his family. Louise didn't expect him to cook or clean or change diapers—really, to do anything to help her in raising the children.<sup>2</sup> Tim Keller's friends remember Bill as a “shadow,” sitting silently in his chair.<sup>3</sup>

Everyone knew who ran the household.

## Who's Boss

Two more Keller children followed—Sharon Elizabeth in 1953 and William Christopher in 1958. Tim dedicated his book *Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* “to my sister Sharon Johnson, one of the most patient and joyful people I know, who has taught me much about bearing burdens, facing grief, and trusting God.”<sup>4</sup>

Tim led the way for his younger siblings. He taught his younger sister, nicknamed “Shu,” to ride a bike by sending her into a pile of boxes. He taught her how to keep her thumb out of her fist when punching so she wouldn't break it. He wrote the stories for their puppet shows, where they sold tickets and snacks. Shu remembered listening to Tim as he climbed to the top of a small tree and told stories down to her through the leaves. Tim composed a comedy routine about the early years of American history. Using their parents' record albums, they acted out *The Music Man* and sang Stan Freberg tunes. Later in life, when he wanted to impress his future wife, Kathy, he had a whole catalog of musicals to draw from, since they were some of the only music Louise allowed in the home other than opera.

Living on the second-to-last street in Allentown, with no branch library and one family car, the Keller children made the most of the books their mother accumulated. And it wasn't like 1950s America, with fuzzy reception on small black-and-white TVs, would have given him many alternatives. Tim was reading by age three, even without an unusual amount of help from his parents. The Keller children developed

## HONEST TO GOD

love for history and nonfiction in general by reading *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* by William Shirer and especially the *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Reference Encyclopedia*. When they saw something on TV, Tim wanted to look it up in the encyclopedia. No matter the article's subject, it all fascinated him. He seemed to retain everything he learned and lectured his younger siblings. The family didn't have much money for books, but they owned a collection of Rudyard Kipling's works. The Kellers also kept copies of *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë, along with *Wuthering Heights* by her sister Emily Brontë.

Tim may have played the ringleader for his younger siblings. But everyone knew who was boss. Visitors couldn't even walk down the hallway without Louise asking where they were going.<sup>5</sup>

"My mom had a huge need to control," Sharon said. "The trouble was, being raised by her, it was like there was one way to do it—her way. And if you were different, you were wrong. There was no such thing as, 'There is more than one way to skin a cat, and if you can't find a door, open a window.'"

Louise Keller's Italian Catholic upbringing demanded that her oldest son would make her proud and her oldest daughter would make her happy. All three children developed an intuitive gift for discerning displeasure from others.

"I think she was hardest on Tim, for sure," Sharon said. "She would have weeks where it's like, 'I'm going to teach Tim who's boss this week.'"

Each child coped differently under the pressure. Sharon escaped into daydreaming. Billy and Tim adopted her bent toward work-righteousness, but developed secret interior lives. Tim pushed back. He defied. He argued. He didn't—couldn't—win her affection and approval. Many years later, when Tim married his wife, Kathy, she noticed what she would later dub the "Mom Competition" between Louise and her older sister Angela. Tim's cousin graduated from college at age fifteen and went on to become a chemical engineer. But Tim couldn't match his brilliance, so he failed to earn his mother any points in the all-important

## MOM COMPETITION

sibling rivalry.<sup>6</sup> Sharon saw her mother as insecure, as someone who needed to be seen as the best in her role to show her worthiness.

“Tim’s intelligence was so widespread,” Sharon said. “I don’t think my mom quite understood that as we were growing up. Tim’s a global thinker. She wasn’t.”

An accelerated learning program, later abandoned by the school, left emotional scars on young Tim. In third grade, he entered the “opportunity class” for gifted Allentown youth. These “best and brightest” students didn’t attend class with their neighbors but instead met together inside a school located in one of the city’s poorer neighborhoods. It’s not hard to see why the district changed this plan even before Tim had graduated from high school. These “egghead” students were marked for bullying, mocking, and teasing. School contributed to Tim’s childhood feeling of loneliness. He grew up socially awkward, a wallflower who didn’t know how to make or sustain friendships. He retreated into reading as a way to control his environment and affirm his own worth. Still, between loneliness and the relentless perfectionism of his mother, Tim became prone to constant internal self-criticism.

Shu, however, remembers how her older brother adapted to adverse conditions. Tim and his younger brother Billy both attended the opportunity class and became targets for neighborhood bullies. Perhaps recalling how and why she met their father, Louise banned the boys from fighting. Out of sheer survival instinct, Tim developed a skill for talking himself out of tight corners with bullies. And he further developed that skill in frequent arguments with his mother, who didn’t shy away from telling her children how often they disappointed her.

“One of the reasons why I think he does so well with talking to people is the result of how he had to handle our mother,” Sharon said. “And he did. If it wasn’t for him we’d never have seen *Star Trek*. He was the one who would have to offer the argument in order to watch this or do that. She was pretty ruthless when it came to getting what she thought. To her, she was just helping us, giving us social graces.”<sup>7</sup>

## HONEST TO GOD

Under the weight of guilt at home, Tim found some refuge in activities. He tried wrestling, but he excelled at playing the trumpet in the marching band.<sup>8</sup> Tim valued his experience with Boy Scouts so much that one of his sons made Eagle Scout even while living on Roosevelt Island in New York. Tim's wife, Kathy, would later nickname Tim "Boy Scout" because his commitment to doing the right thing would never even allow him to park in front of a fire hydrant in the city.<sup>9</sup>

### Evangelical Congregational Church

Even within her Italian immigrant family, Louise Keller stood out for her high moral standards, and she judged other Catholics for falling short. Later in marriage, Louise Keller faulted her husband for abdicating his leadership in the family's religious life. So Louise assumed responsibility. As a nurse during the war, Louise had a Protestant friend who read the Bible and prayed for herself, which was foreign to her Catholic experience. Louise was fascinated to see that she could interact personally with God. After Tim's baptism, she concluded that the Catholic Church didn't line up with Scripture.

So she took the family to the Kellers' ancestral Lutheran church, which at that time was part of the Lutheran Church in America—a denomination that would later become part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The Kellers attended worship every Sunday and even had Tim baptized again as a Lutheran. Louise became a Bible study teacher and a pillar of the church, which was located only a mile from their home. While Louise didn't put much emphasis on theology, she frequently played Bible trivia with her kids. Tim memorized the names of every king of Israel and Judah.

As a teen in the early 1960s, Tim attended confirmation classes in the Lutheran church. In this small congregation, pastors didn't stay around for long. His first teacher, a retired minister named Rev. Beers,

## MOM COMPETITION

offered his parishioners an orthodox take on Christian history, practices, and theology. He required students to memorize the outline of the Augsburg Confession and taught about judgment and belief in Jesus alone for salvation through the acronym SOS: the law shows our sins, the gospel shows our Savior. It was 1963, and it was the first clear presentation of the gospel of grace that Tim Keller had ever heard.

At this time in his life, however, Tim didn't grasp the message as anything more than another interesting idea he needed to master to pass a class. And yet a seed had been planted. Later another pastor, Jack Miller, would water that seed when he cited Martin Luther. And from that seed of the gospel emerged the power that eventually transformed Tim's life, helping define his communication of the gospel as liberation from two kinds of legalism.

The first kind of legalism—salvation through good works—he learned from his second confirmation teacher, a recent graduate of the Lutheran seminary in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Frustrating Tim's mother and grandmother, this minister advocated for the civil rights movement at the height of social activism in 1964. Similar to the professors Tim later encountered in college, this minister also cast doubt on biblical authority and what he considered to be outdated doctrines. He spent little time talking about doctrine or the church. Christianity was a matter of political activism, an effort to make the world a better place.

The juxtaposition between his first and second year of confirmation jarred Tim:

It was almost like being instructed in two different religions. In the first year, we stood before a holy, just God whose wrath could only be turned aside at great effort and cost. In the second year, we heard of a spirit of love in the universe, who mainly required that we work for human rights and the liberation of the oppressed. The main question I wanted to ask our instructors was, "Which one of you is lying?" But fourteen-year-olds are not so bold, and I just kept my mouth shut.<sup>10</sup>

## HONEST TO GOD

After a decade with the Lutherans, Louise Keller found a more congenial match for her own view of religion in the Evangelical Congregational Church, which emphasized human effort in maintaining salvation and achieving sinless perfection. Both at home and in church, Tim Keller learned this second form of legalism—that of the fundamentalist variety. By the time Tim was leaving home to attend college, he didn't just know about Martin Luther; he could personally relate to Luther, who had been afflicted with a pathologically overscrupulous conscience that expected perfection from himself in seeking to live up to his standards and potential.

Those external standards only increased as his parents befriended Bishop John Moyer, a minister in their small denomination, which had German-speaking roots in the Methodist tradition. When Tim graduated from Louis E. Dieruff High School and set off for Bucknell University in 1968, his mother envisioned that he would return one day to lead the Evangelical Congregational Church. Perhaps such a lofty religious position would prove her worth as a mother.

But Tim wasn't so sure he wanted anything to do with Christianity. A cycle of shame had left him starved for a community where he could be included and accepted, even admired. And if that meant he needed to abandon the church, so be it.<sup>11</sup>

## TWO

# THE ABSURD MAN

### *Bucknell University*

The 1968 incoming class at Bucknell University would graduate 650 students four years later in 1972. From their senior year of high school to the day they graduated from college, the world transformed before their eyes.

As they prepared to graduate from high school, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 8. Less than two months later, Robert Francis Kennedy was assassinated in Los Angeles, California, on June 6. As they headed off to college, the Soviet Union suppressed a reform movement and invaded Czechoslovakia on August 20. And the nation watched in horror and fascination as Mayor Richard Daley's Chicago police brutalized protesters outside the Democratic National Convention between August 26 and 29.

Bucknell, a small liberal arts school in rural Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, remained largely traditional and conservative. Some

## HONEST TO GOD

2,800 students lived within short walking distance of each other in three dorm groupings. Throughout much of the 1960s, students were still expected to abide by curfews, and women's dress lengths were regulated. Dorms required men to be announced and escorted in to visit women in their rooms.

The counterculture arrived with Tim Keller's freshman class in 1968. Students divided in easily recognizable ways—long-haired hippies flaunted drug use and sexual liberation on one side, while traditional students sported the Greek letters of their fraternities and sororities on the other. As a wallflower, Keller never risked rejection from the business, engineering, and science students in fraternities. But he didn't fit with the hippies either, even though they took many classes together in the humanities.

In Keller's view, the hippies postured just as much as the jocks.<sup>1</sup> The local chapter of Students for a Democratic Society was relatively small. Philip Berrigan, a Roman Catholic priest and anti-war activist, was held in federal prison in Lewisburg after he conspired to burn draft records with homemade napalm. But no mass movement of nearby students would protest his incarceration in this small central Pennsylvania town of fewer than six thousand people.

Lewisburg may not have been the center of anti-Vietnam protests, but Bucknell kept pace with many of the day's fashionable academic trends. Bucknell's roots stretch back to 1846, when the school was founded by Baptists. But by the time Keller arrived, the administration no longer encouraged traditional expressions of Christian faith. This was the era of mainline Protestantism, when dogma took a back seat to doing good, when the campus Christian Association changed their name to Concern for Action. The psychology department had long since moved on from Sigmund Freud. But the religion department still assigned his teachings regularly. Only two years earlier, *Time* magazine asked, "Is God Dead?" spurred by the publication of Thomas J. J. Altizer and William Hamilton's *Radical Theology and the Death of*

## THE ABSURD MAN

*God*.<sup>2</sup> Bucknell's religion faculty advanced Altizer and Hamilton's cause across their courses.

Another popular course assignment was John A. T. Robinson's *Honest to God*. When the book was rereleased in 2013 on its fiftieth anniversary, the publisher contended that the book had been described as the "most talked-about theological work of the twentieth century." Existentialists such as Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Albert Camus were considered the cutting-edge thinkers of the era. Robinson, an Anglican bishop, argued for realigning concepts of God along existentialist lines and rejecting any notion of God as "out there." Robinson saw himself drawing together the work of Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Rudolf Bultmann to recast Christianity for the nuclear age. Looking back fifty years later, the publisher explained why *Honest to God* created such a stir:

It also epitomized the revolutionary spirit of a fresh and challenging way of looking at the world, which, throughout the 1960s, was to bring about the disintegration of established orthodoxies and social, political and theological norms. It articulated the anxieties of a generation who saw these traditional givens as no longer acceptable or necessarily credible.<sup>3</sup>

As a religion major, Tim Keller read all of these texts and many more. In a course on the Bible as literature, he heard the standard liberal narrative that the Gospels had been compiled as oral traditions from communities scattered around the Mediterranean. Keller's professors taught that the communities weren't so much trying to attest to historical reality as crafting an original narrative that addressed their own situation and solidified their own leadership. Over the years these stories, transmitted orally, took on even more fanciful dimensions. Only then were they written down and standardized. The notion of a historical Jesus, according to this understanding, is but a fable. Most

## HONEST TO GOD

mainstream religion scholars of the twentieth century cast the historical Jesus in their own image—an especially dynamic teacher full of wisdom, who demanded justice and offended authorities.<sup>4</sup>

The history and sociology departments at Bucknell were no less radical, as they were committed to Herbert Marcuse and the neo-Marxist critical theory of the Frankfurt School. Keller agreed with aspects of their critique of the American bourgeoisie society that had reared him in Allentown, but the philosophy behind this form of Marxism baffled him as a teen. He couldn't see how the pursuit for social justice coincided with an understanding of morality as relative. Intellectually, he couldn't align with the odd fusion of Freud and the modern therapeutic with Marxist cultural analysis.

His confusion further intensified because Keller failed to see much concern for social problems from the Christians who advocated for personal morality. He knew he couldn't settle for a Christianity that would mandate apartheid in South Africa or segregation in the American South.<sup>5</sup> He was appalled at the violence he saw waged in the name of Christ against Blacks and their allies in the civil rights movement across the South. Particularly harrowing for Keller as a young teen was a photo of James Meredith, who was shot while he was marching for civil rights in 1966. The shooter demonstrated no concern for Meredith or for the consequences of his crime. Keller struggled to believe that an entire society, especially one so pervasively Christian, could rationalize the evil of racial segregation.

It marked the first time I realized that most older white adults in my life were telling me things that were dead wrong. The problem was not just a “few troublemakers.” Black people *did* have a right to demand the redress and rectifying of many wrongs.

Although I had grown up going to church, Christianity began to lose its appeal to me when I was in college. One reason for my difficulty was the disconnect between my secular friends who supported

## THE ABSURD MAN

the Civil Rights Movement, and the orthodox Christian believers who thought that Martin Luther King, Jr. was a threat to society. Why, I wondered, did the nonreligious believe so passionately in equal rights and justice, while the religious people I knew could not have cared less?<sup>6</sup>

During these college years, so different intellectually and morally from the Evangelical Congregational Church of his youth, Tim began to doubt Christianity. But it wasn't just an intellectual problem for him. He just couldn't sense anything real to Christianity. For two years he struggled between the rigid evangelical faith of his mother, which he could not feel, and the progressive existentialist theology of his professors, which he did not find intellectually satisfying.

## Born Again

As a religion major, Keller took courses that covered Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. He especially wanted to find an alternative to Christian views of eternal judgment, of damnation and eternal conscious torment in the fires of hell. He searched for a religion that would not judge anyone, whatever they might do or believe. He knew he believed in a God of love. He just didn't know which religion, or whether any religion at all, could best introduce him to that God.

Keller appreciated the Buddhist emphasis on selflessness and detached service to others, but Buddhism didn't allow for any kind of personal God, and he concluded that love is something only a person can do. Pagan religions didn't offer this loving God, with their creation myths full of capricious and even malicious gods fighting each other. Only in the Bible did Tim encounter a God who created the world for his own enjoyment, for the sake of love. Studying other religions helped Tim see that not all religious views include a loving God.<sup>7</sup>

## HONEST TO GOD

So he turned his attention to the historical arguments against Christianity and, in particular, in the trustworthiness of the New Testament. He realized that Christianity is rather unusual in its assertion that its core beliefs stand or fall on the historical accuracy of its claims.<sup>8</sup> As Tim investigated what he was learning in class, he wasn't persuaded by the evidence against the earliest written accounts of Christianity. He concluded that his Bucknell professors and the revolutionary books they assigned were wrong.<sup>9</sup>

Keller may have disagreed with *Time* magazine's assertion that God was dead, but he didn't yet feel as though Jesus was alive. Years in church had not led him to a personal experience of God. He didn't pray with any sense of God's presence and felt trapped in a crisis of identity. He sensed the intense expectations of his mother but lacked the desire to fulfill them. Long before the days of the smartphone, Tim spoke to his parents no more than once or twice per month. And when his mother sent him letters, he typically didn't respond. He felt little personal attachment to the Christianity he knew in his teen years and was still searching for a place to fit, a place to belong. He valued the philosophical objectivity of the classroom, but it was only in hindsight that he could recognize his true need—that he cared less about truth and more about belonging. At the time he just felt lonely and unloved.<sup>10</sup>

During their sophomore year, Tim's friend Bruce Henderson lived off campus on the third floor of an apartment with low ceilings. They were so low that Tim, because of his height, couldn't stand comfortably. So he often lingered outside the apartment at the top of the stairs with his back against the wall. Tim, described by Bruce as "master of the pop in," often engaged him in heated debates, even growing animated to the point that Bruce feared Tim's large arms and hands would dent the apartment hallway's walls. Bruce, working three jobs as a student, often backed down because he didn't want to pay for the damage. But he didn't back down from the fight entirely, as the two young men debated identity in ways that only college sophomores

## THE ABSURD MAN

can—discontented with authority but not experienced enough to find their own way forward.

Bruce and Tim had met and become friends through InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Tim had attended the spring retreat in 1969 during his freshman year. Jim Cummings, a student on the same floor in Tim's freshman dorm, had invited Tim to the InterVarsity meetings. With his Lutheran background and his study as a religion major, Tim was an inviting contact for these evangelistically minded students. Tim could speak the language of InterVarsity because of his experience in the Evangelical Congregational Church. He would even act like a Christian because he so desperately wanted friends. It wasn't long before the InterVarsity students got a copy of some C. S. Lewis books into his hands. Soon after, the works of John Stott brought Tim back to Martin Luther's distinction between law and gospel, between saving oneself through good works and receiving salvation as a gift of grace. What Tim had previously recited for a confirmation exam at age fourteen now appeared revolutionary at age twenty. He began to see that the rigid religion of his mother wasn't the only path to being an orthodox, Bible-believing Christian.

Even though Keller had participated in several InterVarsity events, he wasn't part of the chapter's inner ring during the spring retreat, held at a barn converted into a Bucknell faculty member's summer home. Not that InterVarsity had much of an "outer" ring. There were no more than fifteen active students in the Bucknell chapter in the spring and fall of 1969. And even that small group was never all together at one time. Tim wasn't yet ready to join the group, but he had found a community that would help him in his search for answers to his many questions. At the very least, these were students willing to debate him, helping him refine his own beliefs. As older students took interest in him, Tim reciprocated. But he didn't tell them that outside InterVarsity he was living another life—a life apart from the Christianity he adopted for the InterVarsity crowd.

## HONEST TO GOD

By January 1970, during his sophomore year, Tim knew he could no longer continue his double life. He'd been reading the InterVarsity books and befriending InterVarsity students. Only one hurdle remained. What if he met someone he loved—someone who made life worth living—but Christianity said they couldn't be together? Wouldn't that rejection make a lonely young man somehow even lonelier?

Bruce Henderson remembers a decisive moment on his twentieth birthday, April 21, 1970, when he woke up to find Tim sitting on the floor at the foot of his bed, silently waiting for him. Bruce knew something was different, that something significant had changed in Tim. His wrestling was over. Tim had repented of his sin and believed in Jesus. He had put his heart's faith and trust in Christ alone for salvation.

So, what happened? Why did he change? His intellectual concerns about evil, suffering, and judgment didn't suddenly disappear. But after looking for answers in other religions and after debating with Christians, Tim finally came to experience his personal need for God. It wasn't a new method of spiritual enlightenment. Instead, he finally reached the end of himself. Overwhelmed by his sin, face-to-face with his failures and flaws, Tim found the God of love who revealed himself in Jesus Christ and his Word.<sup>11</sup> No longer would he presume to judge God. Now he would follow the God who is just and at the same time is the one who justifies sinners. The Just One had forgiven his sin. The student of religion had become the disciple of Jesus.

"During college the Bible came alive in a way that was hard to describe," he remembered in his book *Jesus the King*. "The best way I can put it is that, before the change, I pored over the Bible, questioning and analyzing it. But after the change it was as if the Bible, or maybe Someone through the Bible, began poring over me, questioning and analyzing me."<sup>12</sup> He'd been taught by his mother and the church of his youth that the Bible is God's Word. But until this personal encounter, the good news of the Gospels didn't strike him as the ultimate reality.<sup>13</sup>

Keller doesn't recall any dramatic changes accompanying his

## THE ABSURD MAN

conversion. He sensed a new reality in his prayer life, though, and he gave up his double life of “freedom”<sup>14</sup> without God. But his friends certainly witnessed a change.

“If you ask about whether there was a change in Tim, there sure was in college,” Bruce Henderson said. “He was a heck of a lot kinder, and you could reach him emotionally. All of a sudden he was present. He was there.”<sup>15</sup>

### **Intellectually Credible and Existentially Satisfying**

Keller didn't keep this experience to himself either. InterVarsity became not only his source of spiritual nourishment but also his outlet for Christian activism. Over the next two years at Bucknell, the InterVarsity students would help him develop a zeal for evangelism. They would teach him to study the Bible and then teach it to others. They would help him ground his beliefs and actions in God himself and not in a subjective or fleeting sense of the world.<sup>16</sup>

Less than two weeks after Bruce Henderson woke up with Tim at the foot of his bed, InterVarsity students were huddled together amid a national crisis. It was the end of April 1970 and the height of the protest movement against President Richard Nixon's expansion of the Vietnam War by invading Cambodia. On May 4, 1970, National Guard soldiers opened fire against student protesters on the campus of Kent State University, killing four people. Students across US campuses, including Bucknell, responded by striking and refusing to attend classes. Keller and the other InterVarsity students at Bucknell, no more than fifteen altogether, prayed and debated whether they should participate in the strike, which remained peaceful. Classes had been canceled, and most Bucknell students were gathering on the open quadrangle every day. An open mic invited diverse perspectives, which favored more liberal and

## HONEST TO GOD

progressive views. The InterVarsity students weren't sure how best to contribute to the conversation on campus.

Eventually one of the students made a sign—white letters on a black background—and posted it on the outskirts of the crowd. For the next day or two, Tim and another student engaged anyone who approached the sign, which read, “THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST IS INTELLECTUALLY CREDIBLE AND EXISTENTIALLY SATISFYING.” They didn't get much of a response—mostly mocking and eye rolls. One student, a friendly acquaintance, surprised Keller by yelling, “Tim! F\*\*\* Jesus Christ.” But Keller remembered many substantial conversations with confused students too. He observed that every person considering Christianity brought rational objections and questions—as well as personal ones—just as he had done before his personal encounter with God.<sup>17</sup> Manning the InterVarsity book table, Tim handed out many of the same books that had helped him on his own faith journey.

Keller threw himself wholeheartedly into InterVarsity leadership. He and Bruce, incoming officers for InterVarsity at Bucknell, traveled that summer of 1970 to Upper Nyack, New York, for a weeklong training session with legendary InterVarsity staffer C. Stacey Woods. The Bucknell students were an answered prayer for Woods. InterVarsity had wanted to open a chapter in Lewisburg but had been thwarted for years by a hostile chaplain.

Bruce doesn't remember much of what they learned at the retreat. But he remembers that during the six-hour round-trip drive and time spent together on the banks of the Hudson River, he and Tim worked out an entire year's worth of activities for InterVarsity. They planned retreats. They identified guest speakers. They organized small groups—all in a week's time.

Those plans included a rock concert with evangelistic aims. Bruce knew about a group back in Pittsburgh called John Guest and the Exkursions. That fall of 1970, the group performed three concerts

## THE ABSURD MAN

at Bucknell, which included brief evangelistic sermons by Guest, an Episcopal priest. Born in Oxford, England, Guest had committed his life to Christ at age eighteen in 1954 during a Billy Graham sermon. He would eventually become a renowned evangelist in his own right and go on to help found Trinity Episcopal School of Ministry and serve on the board of the National Association of Evangelicals.

Guest's rock concerts at Bucknell didn't yield immediate evangelistic results. But they resulted in more than one hundred three-by-five-inch index cards from students expressing interest in spiritual conversations. The small cadre of InterVarsity students at Bucknell now had work to do—following up with interested students.

"This was in Tim's wheelhouse," Bruce said. "He took those cards, and he would visit, one-on-one, with every one of those people. I don't know how he ever got any schoolwork done. He really thrived on taking these young people under his wing. He loved it."<sup>18</sup>

His GPA was suddenly lower on the priority list for Tim. Bruce remembers taking a social psychology class with Tim, who didn't demonstrate any great zeal or proclivity for writing in those student days. But it didn't matter. Tim had found his true calling to public ministry.

Small groups overseen by Keller and the other InterVarsity officers proliferated across campus. The first chapter meeting had seventy students instead of the customary ten or so they had seen the previous year. Tim's own faith blossomed in the spiritually charged environment of those growing InterVarsity meetings. His roommate for all four years, Frank King, didn't profess faith in Christ until their senior year and, in fact, had grown frustrated with the steady stream of students stopping by and calling on Tim at all hours. Younger students at Bucknell were eager for Tim's spiritual counsel. And he often connected personally with their heartfelt hopes and fears.

"Out of his own life experience, he has a depth of feeling that comes through in his preaching that sounds authentic to people," said

## HONEST TO GOD

Janet Essig, an incoming Bucknell freshman in the fall of 1970. “He wasn’t talking at people. He was really listening to people, and they felt encouraged.”<sup>19</sup>

Essig grew up in Summit, New Jersey, about twenty-three miles east of Manhattan. She chose Bucknell because she considered it a haven from the unrest on so many other campuses she had considered.<sup>20</sup> This was a turbulent time on many colleges, and not until December 1972, the year Keller graduated from Bucknell, did the Vietnam draft end. Sue (Kristy) Pichert, in the same incoming class as Essig, remembers Bucknell a bit differently—as a sorority school prone to partying. She chose Bucknell because she knew they had a thriving group of Young Life leaders. She had become a Christian through a Young Life camp at age sixteen.

Sue first heard of Tim Keller when she received a handwritten note from him the summer before she enrolled. The InterVarsity officers divided all eight hundred incoming freshmen between them and wrote notes welcoming them to check out the chapter. In this era before smartphones, emails, and texts, she was the only freshman who wrote back—and only after her sister, Kathy, had perused the letter and pronounced the group okay. Two years older, Kathy was a junior at Allegheny College and had already run the gamut of religion classes with unbelieving professors and chaplains who supported everything but genuine Christianity.

During freshman week, Sue (Kristy) Pichert was getting settled on the fourth floor of the girls freshman dorm when two upperclassmen called on her. This wasn’t all that common, and the other women were impressed. One of her visitors was Tim.<sup>21</sup> Since students lived in such close proximity, Tim could follow up with his list of interested freshmen without much trouble.

During the John Guest concert, many freshmen sensed that God was working in unexpected and powerful ways. Janet Essig remembers the concert held right outside her freshman dorm. Sue met another

## THE ABSURD MAN

freshman believer in Christ, and they would later wed. Her husband, Jim Pichert, remembers Guest emphasizing the difference between knowing Jesus and knowing about Jesus.<sup>22</sup> Hundreds turned out for the event. The freshmen couldn't believe how many other Christians were on campus, all raising a finger to point the "one way" to God through Jesus. That year, InterVarsity at Bucknell exploded from just ten or fifteen students to more than a hundred, largely fueled by zealous believers in this incoming freshman class. Many students professed new faith in Christ despite no organized evangelistic program. For Tim and his friends, it was all shocking and wonderful.

The Jesus Movement had come to Bucknell.

## Life Together

Tim's final two years at Bucknell would be characterized by intense and frequent discussions about Jesus with students considering the Christian faith.<sup>23</sup> This experience and the constant expectation of revival would remain with Keller the rest of his life.

The spring of 1971, acting on behalf of InterVarsity, Tim invited Ed Clowney, the first president of Westminster Theological Seminary, to visit Bucknell and give a special evangelistic talk. Given the popularity of existentialism, Keller asked Clowney to address "The Christian and the Absurd Man" and engage with Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre. Camus was so popular with professors at the time that in the same semester, Tim was assigned his novel *The Stranger* in three separate courses. He had asked the right person to speak. Clowney had studied the Danish Christian and existentialist Søren Kierkegaard for his Master of Sacred Theology degree at Yale.

Clowney expected a small gathering of ten students to greet him after his three-hour drive from Philadelphia. Instead, about 150 showed up. The event was standing room only.

## HONEST TO GOD

Keller remembers the talk as one of the best he'd ever heard. Clowney affirmed Camus's description of the alienation that afflicts humans. Compared to optimistic liberals, Camus was far more realistic about life. Then Clowney argued that the "absurd existence" is not noble but is instead cursed. Alienation is not just an arbitrary reality but is our sentence, our curse, for seeking to live apart from God. He showed how Christianity offers a better explanation for why this world does not satisfy. And he progressed through the biblical story from creation to fall before pointing toward redemption.

InterVarsity invited the crowd that attended the talk to join them on their spring retreat the following weekend. But Tim didn't think anyone would come. Why? Clowney planned to speak about the church, with five long expositions from 1 Peter 2:9–10. Tim, who still believed a person needed to leave the church to find vibrant spiritual life, only signed up for the retreat because he was a chapter officer. To his surprise, about twenty students attended. And one woman professed new faith in Jesus after talking with Clowney.<sup>24</sup>

"It just blew me away," Keller said of Clowney's teaching on the church. "I never forgot it."<sup>25</sup>

Bruce Henderson, Tim's friend and the InterVarsity chapter president, was likewise impressed with Clowney.

"Clowney was wonderful. He was just fantastic," Bruce said. "He could talk to you. He could talk at your level. He took genuine interest in every single person. He was one of those guys who, once you heard him, you could be in a town fifty miles away, but you'd drive to hear him."<sup>26</sup>

In addition to Clowney's talk and retreat, InterVarsity students at Bucknell led evangelistic Bible studies. And they hosted a book table outside the cafeteria in the student union. Keller in particular loved managing the book table. "He was always pushing books, as you might imagine," Sue Pichert said.<sup>27</sup> The books provided fodder for discussion and debate with Christians and non-Christians alike, and Tim was happy to engage with anyone willing to talk.

## THE ABSURD MAN

InterVarsity Press books were prominently featured at chapter meetings and freshman activity fairs. F. F. Bruce's *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, originally published in 1943, countered the prevailing thinking of the Bucknell religion department. Colin Brown's *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* came out in 1969 from InterVarsity and covered the writings of Thomas Aquinas, René Descartes, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Georg W. F. Hegel, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Karl Barth, and Francis Schaeffer. Brown, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary, summarized their positions but also offered Christian responses. Other InterVarsity Press authors prominently featured were Paul Little, Francis Schaeffer, J. I. Packer, and John Stott.

Packer's *Knowing God*, which Keller read in 1971, gave him a taste of Reformed theology. He learned that doctrine and devotion should walk hand in hand on the Christian journey. Of course, C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* was perhaps the most popular title recommended by Keller at the book table. As much as the content, Keller admired Lewis's unique style—his ability to weave together clear prose with memorable illustrations and convincing logic. Imagination and reason could be combined in a compelling, beautiful way.

For a precocious student such as Keller, the high-level philosophical engagement of these InterVarsity authors showed him you could be intellectually serious and also a Christian. Indeed, Keller represented the fruit of InterVarsity's labors on college campuses since the 1940s. If evangelicals had struggled to evangelize college students before World War II, and thus suffered from a reputation of anti-intellectualism, that's not what greeted Keller at Bucknell in the late 1960s.<sup>28</sup> For the rest of his life, Keller's ministry would never stray far from what he learned while standing behind the book table—especially from British authors such as Stott, Lewis, and Packer.

"Tim thrived in that situation," Bruce Henderson said. "His extroversion would come out. His arms would start moving. He loved the

## HONEST TO GOD

debate. He loved to talk. I think that was really important to the intellectual development of many of us.”<sup>29</sup>

InterVarsity introduced Keller to an especially thoughtful stream of evangelical Christianity. To authors such as Packer, who shaped his theological emphases, and Stott, who gave him his first model for preaching. To the practice of a daily quiet time of prayer and reading Scripture. To the priority of closely reading biblical texts in small groups that met weekly for sharing and worship. And to the enduring value of deep Christian friendships—the kind of “life together” extolled by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Inspired by the communal living of Bonhoeffer’s underground seminary during wartime Germany, the InterVarsity students met in small groups every day at 5:00 p.m. to pray and then eat. This spiritual regimen resembled a monastic order. Never would Keller know a more intense, formative Christian community.<sup>30</sup> Before social media and answering machines, the students relied on one another through the vulnerable and intimate moments of these transitional years.

Bruce Henderson’s friendship and leadership stood out to Tim in these initially confusing but ultimately clarifying times, and he would later serve as the best man in Tim’s wedding. Keller remembered, “Bruce was also a giver of tough love, and I remember that he supported me fully as a friend even as he sometimes confronted me about issues in my life he believed I had not fully faced.”<sup>31</sup>

Bucknell, along with its network of alumni, would remain a life-long influence on Keller. Mako Fujimura, an early elder at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, was another Bucknell graduate, and he credits the school’s emphasis on interdisciplinary education as formative for Keller’s ministry success.<sup>32</sup> Bucknell alumnus Dick Kaufmann would later serve alongside Keller as executive pastor of Redeemer during a crucial transition for the church as it grew in size and complexity.

Keller didn’t stay in touch with many of his classmates for very long after Bucknell, mainly because he and his future wife, Kathy, would

## THE ABSURD MAN

form such strong friendships with couples in seminary and in their first church. But Tim would always recall what he learned about the Christian life as a new believer from the Bucknell crew that included Jon Voskuil, Betsy Hess, Bob Pazmiño, David Reimer, Janet Kleppe, and Lora Graham.

### Way Over Our Heads

His friend Bruce Henderson remained in Lewisburg three years after they graduated and even served in leadership at First Presbyterian Church, the most popular congregation among Bucknell students, including Keller. First Presbyterian Church dates back to the Second Great Awakening of 1833, and in that long and venerable history, the Rev. Richard (Dick) Merritt receives only an obligatory mention alongside other pastors in the official church history. But Bucknell alumni see plenty of Merritt in Keller's ministry, all the way through his time pastoring in New York.<sup>33</sup>

Before coming to central Pennsylvania, Merritt graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary, where he had studied with renowned professor Bruce Metzger. For those who've heard both Keller and Merritt preach, the similarities are obvious in several key ways.

"Dick Merritt was a very sophisticated person. He read widely," Bruce Henderson remembered. Merritt peppered his sermons with literary references. "He was probably as sophisticated as anybody I've ever met in terms of the breadth and depth of his readings. He's probably the single best preacher of any kind I've ever heard. Here he was this unknown in this little college town in central Pennsylvania. He could've been a national figure. He was that good. I think that much of Tim's style reflects Dick Merritt's approach."<sup>34</sup>

Whether from Clowney or Merritt, Keller heard at Bucknell the kind of approach to evangelical preaching that he would himself

## HONEST TO GOD

embody in future decades. No bells and whistles. Always present the basic gospel message—Christ is in charge of the world, and he is the way to God, because he alone can redeem us from our sins.

“That was common in both Dick Merritt and Edmund Clowney—the ability to tell you that you are a sinner, and you believe that, but there’s a way out, and that way is Christ,” Henderson said.<sup>35</sup>

Merritt’s preaching wasn’t his only contribution to the spiritual growth of Bucknell students, however. He also prayed with the InterVarsity upperclassmen for the incoming 1970 freshman class. During finals week, Merritt opened up First Presbyterian Church and his office at the church to students looking for a quiet space. On Sunday nights, when Bucknell served its worst meal, First Presbyterian hosted a student dinner. Church families rotated cooking responsibilities, and Keller was a regular. Merritt didn’t plan any formal program with the students. He just answered questions and spent time with them.

Merritt’s style and substance were both formative for Keller. Along with InterVarsity, First Presbyterian Church offered a spiritual haven from the religious establishment of Bucknell, which students such as Bruce Henderson regarded as actively hostile to evangelicals.

Several years ago, Henderson hosted Scottish theologian Andrew Purvis, chair in Reformed theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and an advocate for evangelical renewal in his denomination. While his son was attending Bucknell, Purvis was invited to campus to preach at Rooke Chapel.

“That would have been unthinkable in our day,” Henderson said. “Looking back, God clearly blessed us, despite the fact that we were in way over our heads.”<sup>36</sup>