

INTERVIEW

Interview with Timothy J. Keller

PETER A. LILLBACK

(April 14, 2020)

PETER A. LILLBACK: *Tim great to see you today. Let us have a word of prayer, and we will get started.*

Lord, thank you for the opportunity to interview Dr. Keller. Thank you for your call in his life and the ministry you have granted to him. We pray that this interview would be encouraging to the readers of Unio cum Christo, who are ministering around the globe. Thank you for the privilege of now giving this time to you; we pray for your presence and your glory, in Christ's name, Amen.

Tim, please share a little bit about your life and how you came to faith in Christ.

TIMOTHY J. KELLER: I became a Christian through InterVarsity Fellowship at Bucknell University, where I was an undergraduate from 1968 to 1972, about halfway through. Even late in my freshman year, I started attending InterVarsity through friends. It is a little hard to say exactly when I crossed the line, looking back on it. I was raised in a Lutheran church; I was confirmed a Lutheran; I was a nominal Christian. Then I came to faith that way and almost immediately decided I wanted to go in the ministry and went to Gordon-Conwell for three years, from 1972 to 1975. I was ordained in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), which at the time was only about fourteen months old. Indeed, the first General Assembly was in December of 1973. I was ordained in the summer of 1975 and went to my first General

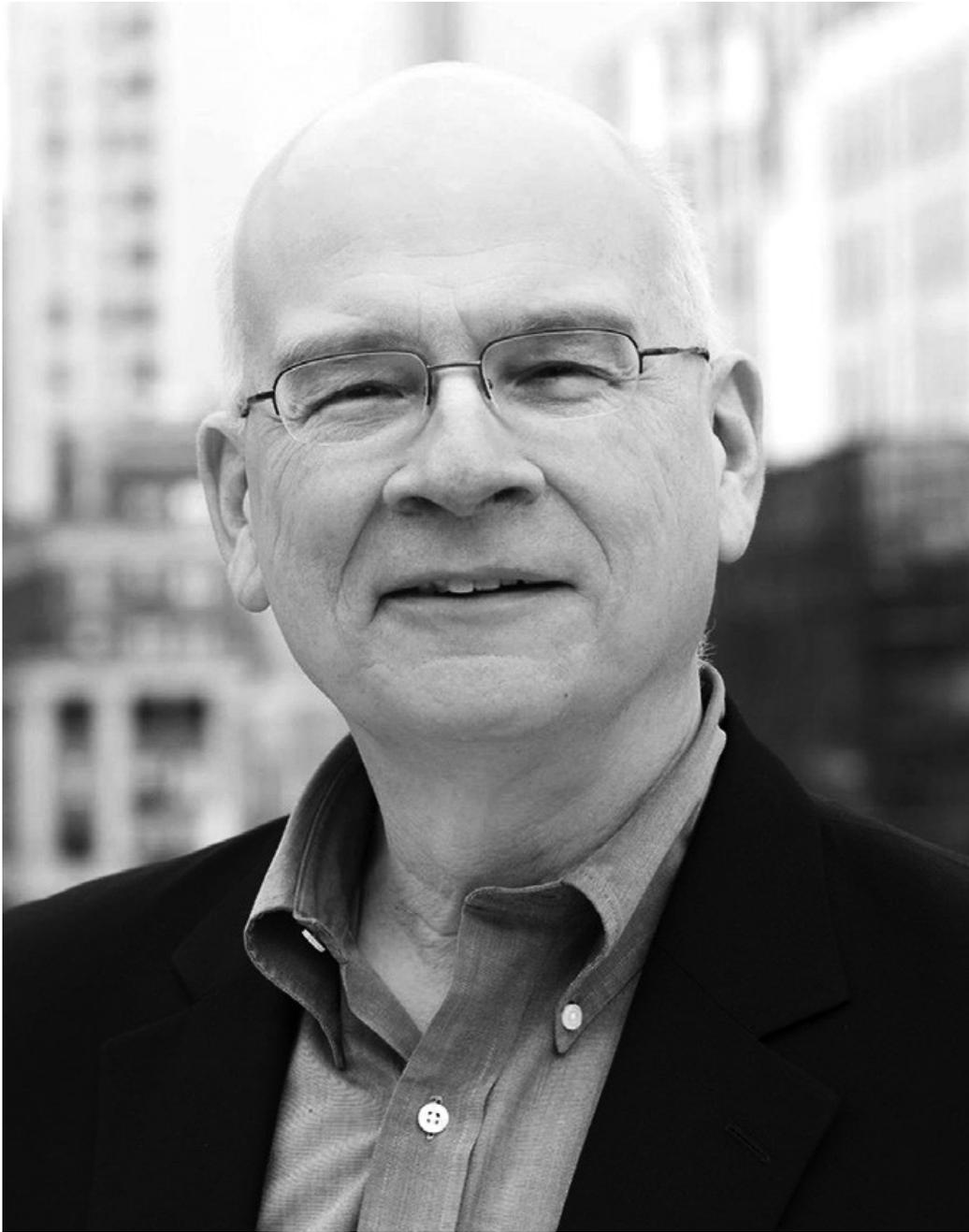
Assembly in the following September, which would have been the third. It was very new and the Book of Church Order was provisional; it could be altered at every General Assembly because it was not set in stone. So, by the time I was 24, I had a church, was preaching three times a week as a pastor in a brand-new denomination. That is the baby boomer experience.

PAL: *What experiences have especially shaped your life and ministry?*

TJK: My marriage without a doubt would be number one, but the trouble is your marriage is like most of your life. My relationship with my wife has been by far the most formative, though I was a Christian when I met her. Nevertheless, it would certainly have been the most important factor shaping my ministry and my Christian life.

PAL: *How did you develop an interest in culture, and how has this area of reflection shaped your apologetics and ministry?*

TJK: Being an older baby boomer, I remember pretty well when most American culture was closely aligned with the basic idea of Christianity, where virtually everybody believed in a heaven and hell, had respect for the Bible, had a belief in objective moral truth; where almost everybody had an understanding of sin and even of the idea that there was a God who was a personal God. Also, the general understanding of morality was largely a Christian one. However, there is no way that America ever was a real Christian culture. I know I am talking with Pete Lillback here, who knows a lot more about history than me, but there was certainly something called Christendom, where America was deeply influenced by Christianity. In my lifetime, I saw that go away. I do not know how you cannot be interested in culture if you find yourself talking to people who are different from you culturally. So in 1975, I could give a gospel presentation like this: “When you die you are going to want to make sure that you are going to heaven, not hell, right?” Everybody would say, “Yeah.” “And the only way you are going to go to heaven is if you live a good life, right?” Everybody agreed pretty much on what a good life was. However, you have not really lived a life as good as it should be, you know you have fallen down, you are really not sure you are going to heaven. Mostly people would say yes, and then you would roll out Jesus and say, “Now maybe you do not understand what Jesus Christ came to do.” Then, you talked about a substitutionary death, his atonement, justification by faith, and a percentage of people at that point would say, “Wow.” You could get there because they had all the basic furniture; you were connecting the religious dots: afterlife, God, sin. They



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had the dots, so you could connect the dots, and a certain percentage of people were ready and open to the gospel. However, the problem is what happens when the dots are not there, when there is no sense of moral truth, no sense of afterlife, no sense of the existence of God, except as an amorphous spiritual thing. Suddenly, I cannot preach the gospel without understanding culture. So, if the question is “How did you get interested in culture?” the answer is, I wanted to evangelize, and, as the culture changed, without understanding culture, I could no longer evangelize.¹

PAL: *How does the apologetic method in The Reason for God compare with classical apologetics and the apologetic methods of Francis Schaeffer and Cornelius Van Til? What is similar to each of them, and what differentiates your approach?*

TJK: That is a great question. I recently was reading Bill Edgar’s book on Schaeffer and was actually dialoguing with him about Schaeffer.² I do not know. I think that *The Reason for God* is a little bit more of a traditional apologetic in the sense of evidences and arguments for God, I am not trying to prove God, but I am looking at the classical arguments, at the evidence for the resurrection.³ So I would say it was more of a traditional evidentialist approach. My book *Making Sense of God* is more presuppositional, more like what Van Til would do, which is to uncover the ground on which people are standing and to show some ways they are smuggling in all sorts of ideas that assume the existence of God, and they do not have a right to.⁴ That is basically what I think Van Til’s approach to apologetics is. To me the difference between Van Til and Schaeffer is more theoretical than real. I hate to open up a big can of worms here, but Van Til did not believe that when you confronted people there was any common ground or point of contact. I think Schaeffer, in contrast, would say there is common ground. When you actually look at how they do their apologetics, by and large, what Van Til and Schaeffer did was very similar, and they would argue over whether what they were doing was assuming common ground or not. So theoretically they differ, and probably I would be a little more like Schaeffer than Van Til. Practically, or methodologically, I would do presuppositional apologetics

¹ For more on preaching and culture, see Timothy J. Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Viking, 2015), and the review by Joel R. Beeke in *Unio cum Christo* 2.1 (April 2016): 235–37.

² William Edgar, *Schaeffer on the Christian Life: Countercultural Spirituality* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

³ Timothy J. Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008).

⁴ Timothy J. Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016).

pretty much the way Van Til or Schaeffer would. Put it this way, this is my idea of Van Til: you do not say to a non-Christian, “Oh, I see your standards of rationality; I can prove Christianity according to your standards; I can come up to your standards.” That would be ceding to them the high moral ground that they are rational, and you are going to try to meet their standards in order to convince them. Van Til says, “No, I am going to question your rational standards; I am going to question your very right to your rational standards on the basis of your own understanding of the universe; and I am going to question your objectivity; I am going to question all that.” I believe that is what we have to do now. So, I would sound Van Tillian, Schaefferian, but I know that there are theoretical differences between the two, and I am probably more like Schaeffer, but methodologically we are pretty much in the same party.

PAL: *What have been the guiding principles for your pastoral ministry at Redeemer Church?*

TJK: My guiding principles came from my training under Richard Lovelace, who taught us that revivals and renewals happen whenever the doctrine of justification, grace alone, salvation is recaptured; that whenever the *solas* are recaptured there is a renewal.⁵ You might want to think of it like a mountain, that from the top of the mountain—on the top there is the clear gospel—either you can slip off into antinomianism or theological relativism and liberalism, or you can slip off into legalism; a legalistic church or a theologically liberal church is losing the power of the gospel to change lives. My preeminent principle was, we are trying to stay up here, that is, the preaching and teaching and ministry of the church cannot fall off into either legalism or liberalism. Insofar as that is so, we are going to have life-changing power; that was really the guiding principle behind communication and preaching, pastoral care, the way we did community and ministry in the world. This principle does to some degree break through the categories of conservative and liberal because conservatism does tend toward a kind of traditional legalism and obviously liberalism tends toward relativism. I could say this is not Bible Belt Christianity, but it is certainly not the mainline Christianity the rest of Manhattan has. So many of the churches in Manhattan were mainline liberal churches, and we were neither conservative or liberal, and so we had an ability to triangulate, split the difference between

⁵ For more on Lovelace’s view of church renewal, see Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979). On the five Reformation *solas*, see Garry J. Williams, “The Five Solas of the Reformation: Then and Now,” *Unio cum Christo* 3.1 (April 2017): 13–33.

what most people thought were the only alternatives: a kind of legalism or a kind of mainline liberalism.

PAL: *Your engagement with the urban context of the church has led you to focus on world mission. How did this interest arise, and in what ways have you sought to fulfill the Great Commission?*

TJK: That is your first easy question, thank you very much! After about two or three years when Redeemer started to flourish, we saw many people become Christians, and it grew, and we started to get nibbles, first of all from the Netherlands. There were two or three conservative Reformed denominations that came to us and said, “Our churches in Amsterdam are dying or have died; we do not know how to get a Reformed ministry going in a big city.” And they said to us, around 1991—they were already starting to check us out—“We do not need money to plant churches—we have money, we have people, but every time we try to start a church, it dies because we know we are using a ministry model that works in our Bible Belt but not in the cities. So would you help us?” Because we have a lot of Asians in our church, the Chinese learned about it, and a lot of them had the same issues, and they said, “Our house churches are flourishing away from the cities but not in cities.” So, we said if we have the ability to do something that a lot of national church leaders do not, which is to get churches going in their biggest global cities, then that is what we can do for world mission. We can say to national leaders everywhere that we are not going to go sending Americans to start churches in big cities, but we are going to help national leaders in every country who have trouble reaching their cities; we are going to help you do it by simply giving you case studies elsewhere. What we would do would be very simple. Let us just say you are trying to reach São Paulo; so you say, “Here is a church in Berlin; here is a church in Nairobi; here is a church in Taipei; here is a church in New York; study them. In what ways are they different? In what ways are they the same? Whatever is the same is probably going to be something you need to do in Brazil too, but in the other ways you probably need to make it different, in that it is Brazilian, and Brazilian cities are not like New York City, although in other ways they are.” So we would expose them to models; we would try to train them and coach them without paternalistically telling what to do, and that was our way of doing it. It came to us. So we do not do any kind of mission; we just specialize and try to help people start churches in the biggest cities; we try to help national leaders do it, and that is our work.

PAL: *That is wonderful. How has your thinking and preaching developed in terms of Christian witness in the public and political arenas?*

TJK: It may be a little late to be saying this. I believe that when I came to New York City the pressure to address public issues or political issues was not there. I know that the mainline churches did it all the time. But I found that most people in New York were struggling with psychological questions. They were struggling with addiction, low self-esteem, and they had a kind of psychotherapeutic Freudian understanding of their problems. I was trying to connect with them and say, “This is Philip Rieff’s triumph of the therapeutic.⁶ Your whole understanding of self-esteem and all that is wrong, but I am not just going to bring you a kind of rigid legalism; I am going to bring you the reordering of the loves of your heart; I am going to give you Augustinian theology that does not ignore your insights and feelings and, at the same time, does not worship your feelings and brings about a renewal of your heart with the gospel by reordering the loves of your heart.”⁷ Most people were wrestling with the twelve steps movement and therapy when I got here. In the 50s and 60s almost every man at night went to a psychoanalyst four or five times a week, and that started to die off by the time I got here, but they were still so therapeutic. When I was to speak publicly to the things they were doing, it was not politics, it was more in the area of therapy, and I was trying to rethink that. By the way, what I learned from John Bettler, David Powlison, and Ed Welch down at Westminster and the Christian Counseling and Educational Foundation (CCEF) was really helpful to me.⁸ The situation has changed now, and in the last five years, everybody became concerned about social justice. All the younger non-Christians are absorbed in identity politics. I do think that there has to be a way to speak to those issues without being captured by a political agenda, but it is really not going to be easy. So, if I were starting a church now, I would have to go back to the drawing board and ask how to speak the gospel connecting with the questions people are asking but at the same time subverting the common answers. I cannot ignore their questions. Weirdly enough, I was originally speaking to a psychological milieu, trying to bring the gospel to subvert and

⁶ Cf. Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic: Uses of Faith after Freud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁷ Cf. Augustine, *The City of God* 15.22; *Confessions* 4.10.15; 13.8.9; *Christian Instruction* 1.27–28; and James Montgomery Boice, *Two Cities, Two Loves: Christian Responsibility in a Crumbling Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), esp. 20–21.

⁸ For a brief introduction to CCEF, see David Powlison, “Biblical Counseling in the Twentieth Century,” in *Introduction to Biblical Counseling: A Basic Guide to the Principles and Practice of Counseling*, ed. John F. MacArthur Jr. and Wayne A. Mack (Dallas: Word, 1994), 44–60, esp. 49–55.

fulfill, as it were; now, we are addressing a sociological milieu where they are much more concerned about justice and marginalization. There are ways to go, and I have actually been experimenting with them, but since I am not a week-in-week-out preacher now, I am doing it more theoretically. I am working with students up here in New York. I teach preaching. I teach a lot of stuff—not for credit, not part of a seminary program, but just New York leaders—and we are working right now on that very important frontier.

PAL: *What are the main diaconal responsibilities of the church, and how should these guide the church as believers engage the poor?*⁹

TJK: Are we going to acknowledge that we are having this interview in the middle of the virus crisis?

PAL: *Please do comment on it.*

TJK: In spite of reputation, I actually think that Christians ought to be very involved with diaconal needs. To a great degree, though, they should be doing it not officially through the local church but through voluntary associations that Christians form. I do not think the church ought to be doing drug rehab or social work, but Christians and Christian organizations should be. So I am definitely a Kuyperian in the sense that I believe you have the institutional church under its elders, and its job is to minister the word and sacraments and do diaconal work for its members. When it comes to reaching out into the city, I think that it should be done through various Christian 501(c)s.¹⁰ When there is a massive crisis like we may be having right now—I do not know how Philadelphia is doing, but up here, lots of local churches are blue collar and poor. People in the poorer areas of the city are being decimated; in those churches 80 to 90 percent of the people are out of work, and they are having a lot of deaths and not just old people’s deaths. If you are a middle-class church, you still have money after all this, a lot of your people are still employed, so I see connecting with some of those churches in poor neighborhoods and helping them not only minister to their own people but also to their neighborhood. I mean temporarily to reach out to the non-Christians in the neighborhood through some of those local churches. I think there are emergency room times. We may be in one. So I could imagine Redeemer Churches connecting to churches in Queens and channeling money to them not only to support their own unemployed but maybe even to help neighbors who are not Christians. That is not ordinarily the best

⁹ Keller was Director of Mercy Ministries for the PCA and wrote on the topic; see, e.g., Timothy J. Keller, *Ministries of Mercy: The Call of the Jericho Road*, 2nd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997).

¹⁰ 501(c)s are non-profit organizations in the United States.

way for the church to be doing its ministry, but there are emergency times in which the world is watching, and Jesus would get a lot of glory if we do that wisely.

PAL: *What is the church broadly conceived doing today to advance the gospel effectively or, on the other hand, to diminish the clarity of the good news of Christ?*

TJK: I think that the church today faces three big challenges. They are not completely symmetrical. You will see what I mean. One, evangelizing very secular people who do not have those religious thoughts we were talking about before is a massive challenge. Even when I started in New York City thirty-two years ago, the average non-Christians could come hear me expound Scripture on Sunday morning and get what I was talking about. In other words, I always tried to include non-Christians as I was preaching. Today, the average non-Christian in New York City is further away both culturally, almost emotionally—they are more wary of the church—and intellectually. They do not have the furniture, as it were, and I feel like there are fewer non-Christians that can just come into a worship service, even one like ours, which was tailored for nonbelievers—it was a real worship service, not a Willow Creek seekers' service—but we were still very concerned to be speaking to non-Christians. Also, thirty years ago I could have a lot more of those folks in the church service than today. However, now, how do you actually find places to engage nonbelievers and talk about the gospel? The second problem is formation. Our younger people are much more influenced by social media and political outlets than they are by the word of God. And then lastly, there is political polarization. Younger evangelicals are skewing left so that they are kind of like what I would call blue evangelicals, and a lot of older evangelicals are to a great degree captured by more conservative political operations, and I call it red evangelicalism.¹¹ That is a bad witness, and it is also bad for the churches' working together. The average younger evangelical that talks much about the problems of racism is going to be called a cultural Marxist online, and the average conservative person online is going to be called a white supremacist. But this is happening inside the church. So overcoming the political polarization—which is really discrediting the church in the eyes of people because we do not have our act together—formation in the digital age, and evangelizing secular people not just in church but even outside, those are the three challenges. The identification of these three factors answers your question as to

¹¹ Contrary to traditional color conventions in politics, in the USA, blue is the Democrat party and red the Republican.

what we have to do and what we are doing that is making things harder.

PAL: *Let me end with two questions. First, what advice do you offer generally and as a friend to Westminster as your alma mater and also to a fledgling ministry trying to do some of the good things you are doing but not doing them as well as we should?*

TJK: Advice for the seminary. I wonder what the seminaries are going to do and how they are going to survive because the economic pressures are enormous. In the past, I felt that seminaries tended to go to the church and say, “We want to partner with the church,” but very often what they meant was, “We have certain products and are trying to get more customers for our products. So, we would be happy to partner with you if you basically buy whatever we have.” I think in the future, although I am really glad to see Westminster thriving in many ways, long term it probably needs to have more equal partnerships with clusters of churches in localities to provide theological education for people without making them get up and move. I really think that that is the way forward, and maybe you do not go far flung. Now maybe you go to Asia, because I know there has always been historically this Asia connection, but I am thinking closer to home as well; for instance, what about Pittsburgh? How do you get the churches in Pittsburgh together to say, “We really want you to help us provide great education for the people here and this is what we need from you, to listen to us, and not just give us your existing product?”

PAL: *The other question is broader in the scientific arena for evangelical Christian believers: what advice would you give to those who are struggling with faith and science issues? How can a Christian be simultaneously scientifically astute and maintain a historic Christian worldview inclusive of creation?*

TJK: About faith and science, I am old enough to remember that science does change. We have to make sure that we are interpreting the Bible properly, and I think we can change our minds on that too. But, by and large, with respect to our understanding of the Bible, which is based on sound exegesis and is also trying to stay in touch with the catholic tradition—I mean the historic tradition of how people in the past understood a text—once you get to a text that seems not to fit in with science, you have to be able to live with the possibility that science may change. I have a very good friendship with Francis Collins, who does not believe there was a real Adam and Eve, and he does not see it ever changing; for him, it is pretty much proven that we did not just have one genetic ancestral couple. I am saying to him, “Within

my lifetime you have changed before,” and I add, “I do not need to let my understanding of what Genesis is teaching be changed by what the science says. I have to let the word speak, and if that means I am in tension with some people, including friends, who are really great Christians and also scientists, I am not going to budge because you do not think the science fits.” Sometimes you have to be willing to live with tension in some places, but you have to let the word govern your understanding of the word and not let science govern it. By the way, I am not a young earth creationist either, and my background was from Meredith Kline and a whole lot of Westminster people who helped me see that we have to be careful regarding our fear of modern science and evolution. We cannot come to the Bible with our fears and try to find the exegesis that most seems to go against what science is saying. So I think that you can let science govern your understanding of Scripture from both a more liberal and a more conservative approach. We need to let Scripture speak and try to be as conversant with science as we can. At Westminster, you have Vern Poythress, and there is nobody better than Vern at listening to science.¹² In the end, though, there are two books of revelation, nature and Scripture: special revelation governs our understanding of general revelation. That is all I can say.

PAL: *What final thoughts do you have?*

TJK: All Christian institutions in the next four or five years are probably going to have a time of reckoning. Christian colleges, Christian seminaries certainly, and even Christian churches have had a bit of a respite from the cultural pressures put on us by the most recent political conflicts in which conservatives and liberals are toe to toe. I do not see that continuing. I think that the centers of culture—the Harvards, Yales, and Princetons, the *New York Timeses*, the Hollywoods, the Silicon Valleys—have been won by secularism. There is going to be a lot more pressure on all orthodox Christian churches and institutions in the future, and we have got not to be surprised by angry attitudes; we have to realize that other Christians have experienced a lot more marginalization in other parts of the world, and we have to be very careful not to panic. What I would say to Westminster Seminary: be part of the folks who say we are going to try to be very smart, but we expect these kinds of headwinds and want to be very wise about them. That is probably the last thing to say which is a bit of a down. On the other hand, we are in the middle of a virus pandemic, and nobody is feeling optimistic

¹² See, e.g., Vern S. Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006).

right, now, including me.

PAL: *Well, Dr. Keller, brother in the Lord, Tim, thanks so much for your time. Would you please conclude in prayer for us?*

TJK:

Father, thank you for Westminster Seminary, for the amazing amount of good ministry that is done, the great number of ministers that have come out and have done wonderful gospel ministry over the years. I do pray for the seminary along with the other seminaries that hold up the inerrant word of God and train people to believe in it and to rightly divide it, and I pray that you would protect them all and help them flourish because you are making them wise, like the men of Issachar who understood the times and knew what Israel should do [1 Chr 12:32]. So I pray for that for them, and I pray that you will continue to help those whom they are training to flourish and grow in grace and the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.

PAL: *Thanks so much for your precious time shared with us.*