

Princeton Seminary cancels award to Tim Keller, but not his lecture

by [Celeste Kennel-Shank](#) in the [April 26, 2017](#) issue

It all began with a 19th-century Dutch theologian. Each year the Abraham Kuyper Center for Public Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary—named for the neo-Calvinist thinker and church leader who also served as prime minister of the Netherlands—awards a Prize for Excellence in Reformed Theology and Public Life. This year, the center planned to honor Timothy Keller, the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York, who leads a global urban church planting network.

But Keller is also known for publishing [his views on gender and sexuality](#), which include the barring of women and LGBTQ people from ordination. In early March, several dozen students and alumni contacted PTS president Craig Barnes about the prize. Some expressed support, but most of them objected because they saw the award as an endorsement of Keller's views.

"That's not what I thought it meant initially, but it became clear that's what it meant to our seminary community," Barnes said.

Keller is a leader in the Presbyterian Church in America, a denomination that formed in 1973–1974, at least in part over "the role of women in church offices," as [a PCA account of its history](#) puts it. PTS is affiliated with the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

"The wound from the divisions within the Reformed communion is clearly not healed," Barnes said. "Both sides of this division in the Reformed communion are still pretty raw."

In a letter to the campus on March 10, Barnes argued that the issue was one of free speech. He noted that Princeton had hosted Catholic and Orthodox speakers who support prohibitions on women's ordination.

Barnes and Keller spoke several times, and "both agreed that the award had become a distraction, and in order for me to press my argument about free speech more cleanly we had to remove the award."

Keller “graciously agreed” still to give the keynote lecture on April 6 at the beginning of the Kuyper Center’s annual conference. Keller noted to Barnes that he had received some pushback from his circles about speaking at PTS. Barnes received another few dozen messages, this time most of them opposed the decision to rescind the award, while some affirmed it.

Melissa Florer-Bixler, a PTS alumna, [wrote in a blog post](#) that she was among those who contacted Barnes to oppose Keller being given an award.

“Let me be clear: there is no negotiation about diversity of views when you are not allowed to sit at the table where those views are being negotiated,” she wrote. “I’m equally concerned at the suggestion that Keller’s sexism is something we can bracket out of his good work.”

Traci Smith, another alumna who [publicly objected to Keller receiving the prize](#), had written that she would happily listen to Keller preach or invite him to hear her preach. The issue was him being given a prize. After the prize was rescinded, she wrote: “Yes to listening to others whose opinions are different from our own (no matter how distasteful they may be). No to giving large fancy prizes that can be confused with endorsement. Some may not be satisfied with this response. I think it’s a great compromise.”

Philanthropists Rimmer and Ruth DeVries fund the Kuyper Prize, which has been offered since 1998 to someone whose “outstanding contribution to their chosen sphere reflects the ideas and values characteristic of the Neo-Calvinist vision of religious engagement in matters of social, political and cultural significance in one or more of the ‘spheres’ of society.”

Previous winners include Rep. John R. Lewis (D., Ga.), author Marilynne Robinson, and Jonathan Sacks, then chief rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth.

Richard J. Mouw, who won the prize in 2007, [wondered aloud on Christianity Today’s website](#) whether there is “a new litmus test” for the prize barring those who do not support same-sex marriage. “Would folks like us automatically be ruled out as being too much like Keller on at least one key issue?”

Barnes stressed that the seminary is a place for theological debates, but the goal is to debate “without creating hurt,” Barnes said.

After the controversy, Barnes was left questioning whether church institutions should be giving prizes.

“It has really revealed the problem of schools granting awards, especially schools that strive for theological diversity, because once you grant an award, you’re affirming a side in a particular theological debate.” —the *Christian Century*

*A version of this article appears in the April 26 print edition under the title “PTS cancels award to Keller but not lecture.” The print version incorrectly states that the Presbyterian Church in America split from the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), when in fact it split from the (Southern) Presbyterian Church in the U.S., which had [left the PCUSA during the Civil War](#). This online edition was corrected on May 9, 2017. We regret the error.*