

The Reason for God by Tim Keller: A Review

Have you ever heard statements like these?

- “How could there be just one true faith? It’s arrogant to say your religion is superior. . . . Surely all religions are equally good and valid for . . . their particular followers.”
- “I won’t believe in a God who allows suffering.”
- “The Christians I know don’t seem to have the freedom to think for themselves. I believe each individual must determine truth for him- or herself.”
- “There are so many people who are not religious at all who are more kind and even more moral than many of the Christians I know.”
- “I have . . . a problem with the doctrine of hell. The only god that is believable to me is a God of love.”
- “My scientific training makes it difficult if not impossible to accept the teachings of Christianity.”
- “Much of the Bible’s teaching is historically inaccurate.” “My biggest problem with the Bible is that it is culturally obsolete. Much of the Bible’s teaching (for example, about women) is socially regressive.”

How do you respond? Are there good answers to such questions? And once you’ve tried to answer such questions, how do you move the conversation away from these peripheral issues and to the Gospel itself?

Tim Keller has been a pastor in Manhattan for almost twenty years. As he reaches out to unbelievers and hosts Q and A periods after sermons, he hears such statements and questions again and again. In a new book, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*, Keller answers these questions, and then presents Christ as compellingly beautiful and the Gospel as rationally coherent.

The Reason for God is a valuable tool for Christians and an excellent gift for non-Christians. It is also becoming a cultural phenomenon: Only a few weeks after publication, it ranks number 11 on the New York Times Best Seller List for hardcover non-fiction, and as of today is among the top 25 best sellers among all books at Amazon. While, inevitably, I have qualms here and there about the way Keller addresses some issues, the overall approach is biblical and the arguments are solid. Don’t miss the endnotes, which frequently provide helpful elaborations on points in the text, and always point to valuable additional readings.

The first half of *The Reason for God* addresses the statements and questions above, presenting answers that aim to bring to light the speakers’ implicit assumptions. He then proceeds to show in each case that the assumptions behind the Christian worldview are at least as reasonable as those behind the speakers’ statement.

For example, to those who question whether only one religion could be true, Keller points out that often the underlying assumption behind such statements is “that this material world is all there is and when we die we just rot, and therefore the important thing is to choose to do what makes you happy.” But this is an assumption, not the conclusion of an argument. Indeed, this worldview is an “implicit religion,”

since it contains “a master narrative, an account about the meaning of life along with a recommendation for how to live” (p. 15).

But Keller then argues that the very doctrine that Christians claim to be true should make them humble, not arrogant. Those who truly understand that Christ “died for his enemies, praying for their forgiveness” (p. 20) will reach out to those different from themselves and serve others with humility. Indeed, this is what we see in the early church – and among many Christians today.

Keller similarly addresses each of the six other issues raised in the quotes above. Perhaps the most powerful passage in these chapters is found on pages 104-106, where, while responding to attacks on the accuracy of Scripture, he deals with the theory that early Christian leaders composed or massaged gospel accounts to promote their own positions. He shows that topics of deep concern to the early church – such as whether or not Gentile converts should be circumcised – are never mentioned in the Gospels. But even more, why should early church leaders present the Apostles as “petty and jealous, almost impossibly slow-witted, and in the end . . . cowards”? Why relate that the first witnesses to the resurrection were women – in a society where such “testimony was not admissible evidence in court”? But most of all, if they could make up any story they chose, why should they present their Messiah as crucified when listeners would be repelled by the idea, thinking that such a person must be a criminal?

After these initial seven chapters, Keller has an especially effective, nine-page “intermission,” making the transition between arguing that “there are no sufficient reasons for disbelieving Christianity” to arguing that there are “sufficient reasons for believing it” (p. 115). He argues that the word “sufficient” does not require “a logical empirical argument . . . that is airtight and therefore convinces almost everyone” (p. 118). Indeed, while some skeptics such as Richard Dawkins claim that in the absence of such an argument they should not believe in any god, Keller argues that even most other atheistic philosophers reject this approach to discerning what is true.

What, then, is a rationally defensible way to ascertain truth? Keller’s approach is to produce “some arguments that many or even most rational people will find convincing, even though there is no [single] argument that will be persuasive to everyone regardless of viewpoint” (p. 120). Agreeing with Oxford philosopher Richard Swinburne, Keller asserts and then attempts to show that “belief in God offers a better empirical fit, it explains and accounts for what we see better than the alternative account” (p. 121). And actually, this approach, rather than an airtight, logical argument, is what we should expect from the biblical storyline. “If there is a god, he wouldn’t be another object in the universe that could be put in a lab and analyzed with empirical methods. He would relate to us the way a playwright relates to the characters in his play. We (characters) might be able to know quite a lot about the playwright, but only to the degree the author chooses to put information about himself in the play.” So “we have a sense that the world is not the way it ought to be. We have a sense that we are very flawed and

yet very great. We have a longing for love and beauty that nothing in this world can fulfill. We have a deep need to know meaning and purpose. Which worldview best accounts for these things?" (p. 122). The Christian claim is that God "wrote *himself* into the play" in the person of Jesus Christ. Does this make sense of the world?

The remainder of the book answers this question. Keller first presents clues for God, such as the regularity of nature and the deep impact of beauty on us. But he goes on to argue from the universal human sense of moral obligation that "belief in God is an unavoidable, 'basic' belief that we cannot prove but can't not know" (p. 142). Evolutionary explanations for the development of moral obligation in the end lead to relativism – there are no moral absolutes. But he argues, "If a premise ('There is no God') leads to a conclusion you know isn't true ('Nepalming babies is culturally relative') then *why not change the premise?*" (p. 156).

From here Keller moves to a particularly helpful discussion of sin, clarifying the distinction between our culture's common definition of sin and the biblical definition. Sin is "not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into *ultimate* things. It is seeking to establish a sense of self by making something else more central to your significance, purpose, and happiness than your relationship to God." By establishing our sense of self in this way, we destroy ourselves and our society. The solution to sin is "not simply to change our behavior, but to reorient and center the entire heart and life on God" (p. 171). Many people think Christians, having admitted their sinfulness, are pursued by guilt. But Keller argues that Christians and non-Christians alike "are *all* being pursued by guilt because we must have an identity and there must be *some* standard to live up to by which we get that identity. Whatever you base your life on – you have to live up to *that*. Jesus is the one Lord you can live for who died for you" (p. 172).

But this coming to Christ can only be by faith, not by our efforts. In the next chapter, Keller distinguishes between Christianity and the general religious principle: "I obey – therefore I am accepted by God." Indeed, Christianity is *not* a religion in this sense, for it teaches that we do *nothing* to earn merit before God. "In Christ I . . . know I was accepted by grace not only despite my flaws, but because I was willing to admit them. The Christian gospel is that I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued . . . that Jesus was glad to die for me. This leads to both deep humility and deep confidence at the same time. It undermines both swaggering and sniveling. I cannot feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself nor less of myself. Instead, I think of myself less" (p. 181). And such unconditional acceptance leads to "the threat of grace:" "There's nothing he cannot ask of me" (p. 183).

After explaining the nature of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and the importance of and evidence for the resurrection, Keller's concluding chapter describes "The Dance of God." He has argued that "Christianity makes the most sense out of our individual life stories and out of what we see in the world's history" (p. 213). He here moves from truth to affection, from propositions to joy. The Trinity itself is the perfect picture of joyful love, and God created the universe to extend His happiness and joy and delight, thus magnifying His glory. "We were designed, then, not just for belief in God in some general way, nor for a vague kind of inspiration or spirituality. We were made to center our lives

upon him, to make the purpose and passion of our lives knowing, serving, delighting, and resembling him. This growth in happiness will go on eternally, increasing unimaginably" (p. 219)

The epilogue begins with a quote from Flannery O'Connor: "To know oneself is, above all, to know what one lacks. It is to measure oneself against the Truth, and not the other way around" (p. 227). That is, God is central, not we ourselves, and we must approach Him as the end, not as a useful means to an end. "We usually begin the journey toward God thinking, 'What do I have to do to get this or that from him?' but eventually we have to begin thinking, 'What do I have to do to get *him*?' " (p. 228). And the answer is twofold: First, repent. But repentance, while including sorrow over individual sins, is much more. You must recognize your main sin: "Your self-salvation project . . . [as we] try to prove ourselves by our moral goodness or through achievement or family or career" (p. 233). We must realize that our "very efforts to be good or happy or authentic have been part of the problem" (p. 237) The second requirement is belief – a trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We must not trust in the purity or extent of our faith, for that just makes faith another work. But saving faith is a turning from ourselves to Christ, however imperfectly, and trusting in Who He is. Furthermore, once we repent and believe, we must also become part of a Christian community, a church.

Keller closes with an extended quotation from and discussion of Flannery O'Connor's profound yet simple short story "Revelation," concerning the salvation of a self-righteous, self-absorbed churchgoer. For that is one of the main messages of this book. Left to our own devices, every one of us is self-righteous and self-centered, satisfied with the merit we've earned from whatever judge we recognize (and that judge may well be ourselves), or struggling as we strive to achieve that merit, or despondent over our failure to achieve merit. By God's Spirit, the Gospel breaks through the resistance of the religious and the irreligious, of Mormons and Moslems, of Yankee fans and Red Sox fans, of self-satisfied church members and self-abusing drug addicts, shining God's light on us, displaying our ugliness – and welcoming us to His intimate family, His glorious Kingdom, in which He will rejoice over us with loud singing for all eternity. May God be pleased to use this volume to bring many into this Great Dance.

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Footnote: Overall the book is well-edited, but there are a number of errors in the last 20 pages. Here are the major corrections; without them, some sentences are incoherent:

- p. 222: In the third line, add a comma and "self" after the word "lowest".
- p. 228: In the sixth line, add "of" after "kind".
- p. 232: In the first line of the last paragraph, add "that" before "may".