

A review of Timothy Keller's book,

“The Reason for God – Belief in an Age of Skepticism” (Dutton, 2008)

A slightly modified version of a presentation made by Vic Uotinen at the Christian Nuclear Fellowship Discussion Group at the American Nuclear Society Conference, Anaheim, CA, June 9, 2008

Reading Timothy Keller's The Reason for God – Belief in an Age of Skepticism led me to reflect on my university years and the early years of my career as a reactor physicist - a period in my life when God used C. S. Lewis' writings (especially *Mere Christianity* and *Miracles*) to answer some lingering questions that had not been answered in my mind up to that point, although I had grown up in a solidly evangelical Christian home and church. Lewis' clear and logical writings made the case for the credibility of the Christian message compellingly, and clarified my thinking on many points.

In much the same way, Keller's book presents the case for Christianity in a fresh, appealing way to the current generation of doubters. It's a refreshing and valuable addition to the considerable literature that has been published previously on the topic of apologetics. Similar to Lewis, Keller explains Christian concepts amazingly clearly, without a heavy use of specifically Christian terminology or jargon. Another thing that's especially refreshing about Keller's book is his gentle, respectful, non-confrontational approach. Instead of denouncing or belittling those who express disbelief in the claims of Christianity, Keller treats each doubter with respect, inviting the doubter to engage in reasoned, respectful dialogue concerning the differences between what Christians believe and what the doubter believes.

Keller writes, “Underlying all doubts about Christianity are *alternate beliefs*, unprovable assumptions about the nature of things.” He expresses his main thesis as follows: “My thesis is that if you come to recognize the beliefs on which your doubts about Christianity are based, and if you seek as much proof for *those* beliefs as you seek from Christians for theirs – you will discover that your doubts are not as solid as they first appeared.” Keller hopes to help each doubter discover his/her own faith-foundation (every person has such a foundation, whether they are aware of it or not), and to examine that foundation honestly and critically, even as he asks believers to examine theirs.

Keller is the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, where he has used this refreshing, gentle approach remarkably effectively in sharing the claims of Christ with thousands of skeptical young professionals in Manhattan over the past two decades. Through Keller's ministry, literally thousands of such skeptics/doubters have been led – gradually and respectfully - first to recognize the *beliefs* on which their doubts are based, secondly, to *critically examine* their beliefs, and thirdly to discover that those beliefs are based indeed on a very shaky and questionable foundation. Keller draws some 5,000 young followers each Sunday (average age 30), many of them having come to faith in Christ already, and many others in various stages of becoming convinced and of “being converted.”

Keller has given the heading “The Leap of Doubt” to the first half of the book. In it, he addresses seven of the most frequently expressed doubts about Christianity that people have expressed to him during his 19 years at Redeemer. He devotes a chapter to each of these seven doubts, revealing the belief system on which the doubt is based, and demonstrating – gently and respectfully - the inconsistencies and the shallowness of such a belief system.

The second half of the book (“The Reasons for Faith”) is a more positive exposition of the Christian faith, quite a compelling exposition, in which Keller clearly and understandably lays out for the honest seeker the reasonableness of believing what orthodox Christianity teaches and what Christians believe.

I thought the chapter on “The Clues of God” was especially noteworthy. Keller writes of an honest seeker who had trouble with all the traditional arguments or “proofs” for God’s existence. He looked at one argument for God after another, and, though many of them had substantial merit, he found not one single argument that was absolutely airtight. Keller suggested that one should consider the many arguments for God’s existence not as airtight *proofs*, but rather as *clues*. When he went about it with that perspective, this seeker began to see that, “cumulatively, the clues of God had a lot of force to them.”

Another chapter I found especially appealing is the chapter on “Religion and the Gospel,” in which Keller explains the radical difference between the Christian gospel and all other religions. Keller summarizes this difference by stating “Christianity’s basic message differs *at root* with the assumptions of traditional religion. The founders of every other major religion essentially came as teachers, not as saviors. They came to say, ‘Do this, and you will find the divine.’ But Jesus came essentially as a savior rather than as a teacher (though he was that as well). Jesus says, ‘I am the divine come to *you*, to do what you could not do for yourselves.’ The Christian message is that we are saved not by our record, but by Christ’s record. So Christianity is not religion or irreligion. It is something else altogether.”

In the epilogue, Keller asks the question, “Where do we go from here?” Assuming the once skeptical reader, having read the book, has come to view Christianity now as more plausible, Keller explains the process of moving from there to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Keller explains the meaning and necessity of repentance and faith, and also the importance of becoming committed to a community of believers. It is clear from this section of Keller’s book that he is more in line with classical evangelicalism than was Lewis, and that he sees the process of conversion from the perspective of classical Reformed theology

The reader gains an understanding of “where Keller is coming from” from the following in the acknowledgements section: “I owe a deeper sort of acknowledgement to the three people to whom I am most indebted for the fundamental shape of my Christian faith. They are, in order, my wife, Kathy, the British author C. S. Lewis, and the American theologian Jonathan Edwards. Lewis’ words appear in nearly every chapter. It would be wrong not to admit how much of what I think about faith comes from him. Edwards’ words appear more seldom, because he has contributed more to the underlying structure of what can be called my “theology”....My wife, Kathy, never gets footnoted, yet she is the main author of the faith and thought of *this* author. She put me on to Lewis, to Edwards and Reformed theology, and to the importance of prayer, social justice, and the city.”

If you’re a believer still wrestling with some lingering intellectual doubts for which you’ve not yet received satisfying answers, or if you’re a believer who desires to share your faith more effectively with the “thinking doubters” God has put into your life, you would do well to read Keller’s book. It would also be a great book to share with some of your doubting friends or acquaintances. – maybe even to read it and discuss it together. Familiarity with traditional Christian terminology is not a prerequisite, and the respectful, non-confrontational approach should, in my opinion, make it quite appealing to many honest doubters.