

BOOK REVIEW

of

Timothy Keller,

The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism,
Dutton, 2008.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

I believe it was in 1988 when I attended a weekend conference in New Jersey where Tim Keller was the speaker. He was then telling people about his plans to move to New York City, to Manhattan, to start a conservative Presbyterian church there. He felt called to minister to a large city population at a time when many churches were fleeing to the suburbs. Dr. Boice, senior pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in downtown Philadelphia, had a similar commitment to large city ministry and I have often wondered if he had influenced Keller in his decision. I don't know the answer to that question. On the other hand, many wondered at Keller's decision. Probably not because of any lack of perceived need but rather because of the magnitude of the task. He wasn't proposing to join an already established ministry (there probably wasn't one, all of the old ones had already left), but rather to start one in downtown Manhattan! I moved to Wichita in 1990 and have heard very little of Keller since then. This book, *Reason for God*, is the first book of Keller's that I have read. I was delighted to read it not only because of the content (more below - this is a review!) but also because it has filled in the details of his Manhattan ministry. He has apparently been wildly successful in his endeavors! I learned about this book from Lauren Green on the Fox News channel, Green being a member of Keller's congregation. This book is based on Keller's ministry and experiences with the skeptical residents of Manhattan. What are the real questions that people are asking? What answers does the Christian faith have to offer to those questions? Just how relevant is Christianity to this modern world? How best can Christianity be presented to skeptical enquirers? Is this the Apostle Paul in Athens or in Corinth? No, it is Keller in Manhattan! According to *New York* magazine: "With intellectual, brimstone-free sermons that manage to cite Woody Allen alongside Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Keller draws some five thousand young followers every Sunday. Church leaders see him as a model of how to evangelize urban centers across the country, and Keller has helped 'plant' fifty gospel-based Christian churches around New York plus another fifty from San Francisco to London."

There are two parts and fourteen chapters in this book. Part 1 is The Leap of Doubt and contains the first seven chapters. Chapter 1 is titled There Can't Be Just *One* True Religion. Chapter 2 is titled How Could a Good God Allow Suffering? Chapter 3 is titled Christianity Is a Straitjacket. Chapter 4 is titled The Church Is Responsible for So Much Injustice. Chapter 5 is titled How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell? Chapter 6 is titled Science Has Disproved Christianity. Part 2 is The Reasons for Faith and contains chapters eight through fourteen. Chapter 8 is titled The Clues of God. Chapter 9 is The Knowledge of God. Chapter 10 is The Problem of Sin. Chapter 11 is titled Religion and the Gospel. Chapter 12 is titled The (True) Story of the Cross. Chapter 13 is The Reality of the Resurrection. Chapter 14 is The Dance of God. The book closes with an Epilogue: Where Do We Go from Here?

Kelly encourages his readers to doubt, Christians as well as unbelievers. In the Introduction he writes: "People who blithely go through life too busy or indifferent to ask hard questions about why they believe as they do will find themselves defenseless against either the experience of tragedy or the probing questions of a smart skeptic." "Believers should acknowledge and wrestle with doubts – not only their own but their friends' and neighbors'." "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." And with this he sets the stage for dialogue about serious questions. Throughout the book he uses this approach. Have you really understood the Christian message? If you doubt it, upon what are your doubts based? Are those doubts justified? For example, in Chapter 1 he discusses doctrine and how many think that doctrine is harmful and that what really matters are the teachings of major religions that seem similar. He responds as follows: "Ironically, the insistence that doctrines do not matter is really a doctrine itself. It holds a specific view of God, which is touted as superior and more enlightened than the beliefs of most major religions. So the proponents of this view do the very thing they forbid in others."

Granted that at least some evil in the world does pose a problem, but I think Keller's take on it is a good one. He writes in Chapter 2: "Tucked away within the assertion that the world is filled with pointless evil is a hidden premise, namely, that if evil appears pointless to me, then it must *be* pointless. Again the reasoning is, of course, fallacious. Just because you can't see or imagine a good reason why God might allow something to happen doesn't mean there can't be one. [Remember Job.] Again we see lurking within supposedly hard-nosed skepticism an enormous faith in one's own cognitive faculties. If our minds can't plumb the depths of the universe for good answers to suffering, well, then, there can't be any! This is blind faith of a high order." Later in the same chapter he displays the fallacious logic of the atheist concerned with justice: "On what basis, then, does the atheist judge the natural world to be horribly wrong, unfair, and unjust? The nonbeliever in God doesn't have a good basis for being outraged at injustice, which, as Lewis [C.S. Lewis] points out, was the reason for objecting to God in the first place. If you are *sure* that this natural world is unjust and filled with evil, you are assuming the reality of some extra-natural (or supernatural) standard by which to make your judgment."

Reminiscent of Phillip Johnson's lecture at Princeton "Can Science Know the Mind of God?", Keller writes in Chapter 8: "if we can't trust our belief-forming faculties to tell us the truth about God, why should we trust them to tell us the truth about anything, including evolutionary science? If our cognitive faculties only tell us what we need to survive, not what is true, why trust them about anything at all? . . . If we believe God exists, then our view of the universe gives us a basis for believing that cognitive faculties work . . . I want to demonstrate that you already know that God does exist . . . belief that we cannot prove but can't not know."

This is a good read. Because of its apologetic value it may also be a good book to give to someone.