

The Reason for God
January 24, 2010
Father Marshall Huey
Student's Name _____

THE REASON FOR GOD
SESSION ONE: SYLLABUS

In this class, we will examine the chapters in Timothy Keller's best-selling book *The Reason for God*. Copies of the book are available through the Church (suggested \$15, payable to Old St. Andrew's).

Each week is self-contained, so if you miss a week, just come the next time! These study guides will be posted on the Church web-site for you to access.

We will discuss two chapters each Sunday. Each chapter moves quickly and is easy to read. This shouldn't be too difficult! In this way, we can finish the Class before Easter.

<u>Sunday</u>	<u>Chapter and Subject</u>
January 31	<i>Chapter 1: There can't be just one true religion.</i> <i>Chapter 2: How could a good God allow suffering?</i>
February 7	<i>Chapter 3: Christianity is a straightjacket.</i> <i>Chapter 4: The Church is responsible for so much injustice.</i>
February 14	<i>Chapter 5: How can a loving God send people to Hell?</i> <i>Chapter 6: Science has disproved Christianity.</i>
February 21	<i>Chapter 7: You can't take the Bible literally.</i> <i>Chapter 8: Intermission.</i>
February 28	<i>Chapter 8: The clues of God.</i> <i>Chapter 9: The knowledge of God.</i>
March 7	<i>Chapter 10: The Problem of Sin.</i> <i>Chapter 11: Religion and the Gospel.</i>
March 14	<i>Chapter 12: The (true) story of the Cross.</i> <i>Chapter 13: The reality of the Resurrection.</i>
March 21 (Palm Sunday)	<i>Chapter 14: The Dance of God.</i> <i>Epilogue: Where do we go from here? Into Holy Week.</i>

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THE REASON FOR GOD
SESSION TWO:

Chapter 1: There can't be one true religion.

1. Read John 14: 1-14. What words in this passage contribute to Christian claims of “exclusivity” and can lead to Christian “intolerance?”

2. Read John 20: 19-30. How did Jesus and the apostles treat Thomas during Thomas's time of doubt? Did Thomas stay with them, or was he rejected?

3. Keller states that all world religions can't “all be equally right about the nature of God (page 4). What would you say is unique about Christianity relative to the other major faith traditions of the world?”

4. What do you think about Keller's statement (page 13) that “it is no more narrow to claim that one religion is right than to claim that one way to think about all religions (namely that all are equal) is right. We are all exclusive in our beliefs about religion, but in different ways.”

5. Read Matthew 5:13-16. How might this type of behavior influence non-believers?

6. What are some forms of behavior that give a negative impression of Christianity (James 3, for example)?

7. A prominent Christian religious leader is quoted as saying “*We who practice the Christian tradition understand him (Jesus) as our vehicle to the divine. But for us to assume that God could not act in other ways is, I think, to put God in an awfully small box.*” What do you think about this statement?

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THE REASON FOR GOD
SESSION TWO:

Chapter 2: How could a good God allow suffering?

1. How might the recent earthquakes in Haiti be used as an argument against the existence of God?

2. How might the sinful nature of humanity have contributed to the suffering in Haiti?

3. Keller states that suffering can bring “insight, character and strengths” (page 25). Think about a time of suffering in your own life. Did you gain “insight, character and strength,” or did you react negatively? (Mark 8:32-33) (James 1:2-4).

4. Read John Chapter 9. How does the story of the Man Born Blind fit into this discussion, or not?

5. Read Luke 23:32-43. How might the story of the two men on the Cross illustrate this argument?

6. How might we as Christians demonstrate God’s love, and thereby the existence of God, THROUGH the suffering in Haiti?

3. Keller states that true community has to hold its members accountable for a set of beliefs and practices (p. 40), or it isn't a community at all. However, he contends that an "open and caring community" is one that leads its members to treat each other with love and respect rather than "demonizing those who violate their boundaries." *Read Matthew 18:15-19. What are some examples of boundary violations that might occur within a church? Is this passage from Matthew realistic in today's world?*

4. Keller argues (p. 47) that, "in many areas of life, freedom is not so much the absence of restrictions as finding the right ones, the liberating restrictions" and that "love is the most liberating freedom loss of all" (p. 48). *Read in the Gospel of John, Chapter 15:9-17, and also read the first letter of John (I John) 3:11-24. What is the "freedom loss" of love and why should Christians give up their "personal autonomy" to love others? Look also at I Corinthians 8. Is the "freedom loss" of Christian love really a "loss"?*

5. When you fall in love, you want to please the beloved. Once you realize how Jesus changed for you and gave himself for you, you aren't afraid of giving up your freedom and therefore finding your freedom in him. (p. 51). *So, then, is Keller agreeing that Christianity really IS a straightjacket, it's just that he likes the feel of that straightjacket??!*

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February 7, 2010
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THE REASON FOR GOD
SESSION THREE:

Chapter 4: The Church is responsible for so much injustice

1. I have a friend who won't go to Church because he says that it's full of hypocrites. He says that the day he finds a Church full of "Beatitude Christians" (Matthew 5), who really live their faith, he'll go to Church. Keller states (p. 53) that "many people who take an intellectual stand against Christianity do so against a background of personal disappointment with Christians and churches." *Read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount (Matthew Chapters 5-7—ok, it's a lot to read!) How might the Beatitudes (beautiful attitudes) be argued to be a personal morality statement rather than an institutional one?*

2. Keller says that the theologian Karl Barth wrote that "it was the church, not the world, who crucified Christ (p. 60). *Read Luke 12. What is the "yeast of the Pharisees? Was the "institutional church" any better in Jesus' day?*

3. Read Acts 5, the story of Ananias and Sapphira. Read Paul's letter to the Galatians, Chapter 1:1-10. *Is corruption and bad behavior within the Church a 20th/21st Century phenomenon? Does that justify it? Will it EVER cease?*

4. Keller seems to be justifying corporate Church sin by saying the Church is a “hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints” (p. 55). *Does this, in effect, make the admission that the Church IS responsible for so much injustice?*

5. Keller seems to argue that the moral standards that judge the Church as being hypocritical comes from Christian teaching itself (p. 62), and says that “the Bible itself has taught us to expect the abuses of religion and it has also told us what to do about them” (p. 63). *gree or disagree?*

6. Slavery, civil rights, Nazism in Germany, all were advanced and justified from the pulpit. Sexual abuse of children by clergy, and cover-up by the Church, has been a huge mark against the Church in recent years. Old St. Andrew’s was built by slave hands and the slaves, who attended with their owners, sat in the balcony or outside. Keller says, at the end of this Chapter, that “when people give their lives to liberate others as Jesus did, they are realizing the true Christianity that Martin Luther King, Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and other Christian voices have called for” (p. 69). *What does that say to us today at Old St. Andrew’s?*

7. *So, is Keller caving in and agreeing that the Church IS responsible for so much injustice, it’s just that it’s outweighed by the good that it does? If so, maybe we should all just sleep in on Sundays?!?!?*

4. How do the differing views of Christian denominations, and even differing views WITHIN a denomination, on issues such as sexuality and moral choices, contribute to “church shopping” to find a place that fits MY beliefs, rather than vice versa?

5. Keller argues that “only if I am sure that there is a God who will right all wrongs and settle all accounts perfectly do I have the power to refrain” from vengeance and retribution. (p. 77). Agree or disagree?

6. “Hell, then, is the trajectory of a soul, living a self-absorbed, self-centered life, going on and on forever.” (p.79). C.S. Lewis describes Hell as “the greatest monument to human freedom.” (p. 82) . Agree or disagree?

7. Under Keller’s view, then, who is the “divine judge,” God, or ourselves as a result of our choices? Can you accept this?

8. What about the “God of the Old Testament” who smites people? Did God change God’s mind and send Jesus, or were the Old Testament writers engaged in self-justification, or a little of both?

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THE REASON FOR GOD
SESSION FOUR:

Chapter 6: Science has disproved Christianity.

1. Keller defines a miracle as the “intervention of God into the natural order” (p. 88). He also says that “evolutionary science assumes that more complex life forms evolved from less-complex life forms through a process of natural selection” and that “many Christians believe that God brought about life this way” (p. 90). Do you see the belief in miracles as being related to the belief in God’s involvement in evolution? Do you see the tie between the two? Do you see them as mutually exclusive?

2. Read the creation account in Genesis 1. What is the order of things created in the six “days” of creation? How does that compare with the order in which evolutionary science teaches that our present world came to be? Do you see these as in parallel or in conflict? Given the fact that the Book of Genesis is generally attributed to the time just after Moses, do you find it striking that the writers of Genesis came up with this order, given their limited knowledge of natural science?

3. Keller says that the “doubts” revealed in Matthew 28 (p. 98) help him to believe in the accuracy of the Bible. Look also at the story of “Doubting Thomas” in John 20. Do these honest expressions of “doubt” help or hinder YOUR faith?

4. If all Scripture is truly “inspired by God” (I Timothy 3:14-17), then what do you make of Paul’s writings regarding slaves obeying their masters (I Timothy 6) and women remaining silent and submissive (I Timothy 2:8-15)?

5. Keller says “don’t worry about gender roles until figure out what you think about the central teachings of the faith.” (p. 117). Is this a cop-out?

6. Keller argues for an interactive God and an authoritative Bible as the “precondition” for a personal relationship with God (p. 118). Agree or disagree?

7. After reading Chapter 7, do you think that Keller takes the Bible “literally?”

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February 21, 2010
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THE REASON FOR GOD
SESSION FIVE:

Intermission.

1. We have encountered several reasons given by people for disbelieving Christianity: there can't be one true religion; a loving God couldn't allow suffering; Christianity is a straightjacket; the Church has caused so much injustice; a loving God couldn't send people to Hell; science has disproved Christianity; and you can't take the Bible literally. Which of these arguments causes YOU the most "doubt?"

2. Keller defines a Christian as one who believes "that the triune God created the world, that humanity has fallen into sin and evil, that God has returned to rescue us in Jesus Christ, that in his death and resurrection Jesus accomplished our salvation for us so we can be received by grace, that he established the church, his people, as the vehicle through which he continues his mission of rescue, reconciliation, and salvation, and that at the end of time Jesus will return to renew the heavens and the earth, removing all evil, injustice, sin, and death from the world." (p. 121). What do you make of this summary?

Over, please.

3. Keller says that Christianity's account "makes the most sense of the world" (p. 127). Is this oversimplified?

4. Does the humanity of God in Jesus Christ reaffirm your faith as the "ultimate evidence for the existence of God" (p. 128)?

5. We are at "halftime." What's your assessment so far?

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THE REASON FOR GOD
SESSION SIX:

Chapter 8: The Clues of God.

If death ends all, if I have neither to hope for good nor to fear evil, I must ask myself what I am here for, and how in these circumstances I must conduct myself.

--Somerset Maugham, The Summing Up

There's nothing, nothing, absolutely no reason for existing.

--Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea

1. Keller encourages us to avoid trying to find “proofs” for God and instead find “clues” of God (p. 132). Keller writes that “everything we know in this world is ‘contingent,’” that is, it “has a cause outside of itself. Therefore, Keller argues, the world has to be dependent on some cause outside itself (p. 133). The Rev. Donald McPhail and Dr. Lee Hershon, in our Wednesday night Lenten series this past week, pointed out that Genesis 1 says that “in the beginning, God created...” and that therefore, at the beginning, God already was. *How do YOU reconcile the concepts of evolution, natural selection, creationism, and the “big bang” theory?*
2. Do you see the “fine tuning” argument, “namely that the universe was prepared for human beings,” (p. 135) as helpful, irrelevant, or harmful (i.e., that the chances of such intricate balances as those which allow for life on Earth, as well as the intricacies of the human body, could happen by chance).

Over, please.

3. What about the “regularity of nature” argument, namely that we don’t have any rational reason to assume that the “laws of nature” will continue to hold true tomorrow outside the existence of an outside force who so ordains (p. 136).

4. Now, the “clue of beauty,” a wanting for something that “nothing in this world can fulfill” argument, namely that emotions such as love, and art, are not just the result of “blind natural forces” (p. 138-39).

5. Keller says that “religious sentiment” is contrary to natural selection because religious principles advocate kindness to the weak rather than triumph over them. What about this argument?

6. Okay, now the hard part. Rank in order, 1-5, with 1 being the best argument and 5 being the “weakest,” your views of the five “clues of God”: (1) there had to be an outside creator force; (2) God “fine tunes” God’s creation; (3) the “regularity of nature” points to God; (4) the “clue of beauty” and emotions point to God’s existence, and (5) the existence of religious sentiment and a longing for God as being contrary to natural selection.

3. Western moral values, which derive from Judeo-Christian principles, include the altruistic value system for those outside our system of economics and beliefs. Does this truly, as Keller argues, fly in the face of natural selection and support the belief in God (p. 152-53).

4. Keller argues that the forces of nature underscore the principle of “violence by the strong against the weak.” (p. 161). Yet, he argues, morality teaches against violence by the strong against the weak. Why is this? Keller doesn’t argue this, but could it be that WE formulate morality from a fear that, one day, WE will be the weak?

5. Keller says that it is “dishonest” to believe in God without a code of morality, and similarly, it is hypocritical to adopt a code of morality absent the belief in God (p. 160). Do you accept this as an argument for the existence of God?

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THE REASON FOR GOD
SESSION SEVEN:

Chapter Ten: The Problem of Sin

1. In Genesis 3:4-5, the serpent says to the woman, “you will not surely die, for God knows that when you eat of it (the fruit of the tree) your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” Keller says that sin “is seeking to become oneself, to get an identity, apart from God.” (p. 168). *In what ways do we seek to “be like God”?*

2. Keller quotes Simone Weil: All sins are attempts to fill voids. The first commandment is to “have no other gods before me.” Again, Keller quotes Simone Weil (p. 173): “one has only the choice between God and idolatry, and if one denies God...one is worshipping some things of this world in the belief that one sees them only as such, but in fact, though unknown to oneself imagining the attributes of Divinity in them.” *What are some of the “gods” in your life that you “deify,” and what “holes” do we attempt to fill with this idolatry?*

Over, please.

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THE REASON FOR GOD
SESSION EIGHT:

Chapter Twelve: The (True) Story of the Cross

1. “The Christian God sounds like the vengeful god of primitive times, who needs to be appeased by human sacrifice. (this is) divine child abuse.” (Keller, p. 194). What does the concept of “atonement” mean to you? Read Genesis 22, the account of Abraham and his son, Isaac. If God wanted human sacrifice, how might the story of Abraham and Isaac be different? Can you find any account of human sacrifice in the Bible? What relevance does this have to your understanding of the Cross?

2. You will stay trapped in your anger unless you forgive (him) thoroughly from the heart and begin to love (him). ... Forgiveness must be *granted* before it can be felt. If you are not confronting them for their sake or for society's sake, but for your own sake, just for payback, the chance of the wrongdoer ever coming to repentance is virtually nil. (Keller, p. 196). Read Matthew 6:9-15, Jesus' teaching about the Lord's Prayer. *If you accept that Jesus is God incarnate, what does God say about the effect of our unforgiveness on our own souls? Next, take the “grocery store” test. Who in this world would you LEAST like to round the corner of the grocery aisle and, literally, bump into? Do you need to forgive that person?*

Over, please.

3. “Forgiveness means bearing the cost instead of making the wrongdoer do it, so you can reach out in love to seek your enemy’s renewal and change. Forgiveness means absorbing the debt of the sin yourself. Should it surprise us, then, that when God determined to forgive us rather than punish us for all the ways we have wronged (God) and one another, that he went to the Cross in the person of Jesus Christ and died there? (Keller, p. 199). *Our Old Testament lesson for Sunday March 7 is from Exodus 3: God says “I have known their suffering.” What difference does it make for God to come into time and live and die as one of us?*

4. “It is crucial at this point to remember that the Christian faith has always understood that Jesus Christ is God. God did not, then, inflict pain on someone else, but rather on the Cross absorbed the pain, violence and evil of the world into himself.” (Keller, p. 200). Keller goes on: “Jesus did not only suffer for us but with us.” (Keller, p. 203). *How does our understanding of the Cross change if Jesus is just “a good man” or a “prophet” or a “vehicle to the divine?”*

5. The “substitutionary atonement” theory is reflected in Keller’s quote of John Stott, a famous theologian: *“The essence of sin is we human beings substituting ourselves for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for us. We....put ourselves where only God deserves to be; God... puts himself where we deserve to be.”* (Keller, p. 202, quoting Stott, *The Cross of Christ*. What do you think?

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SESSION EIGHT:

Chapter Thirteen: The Reality of the Resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus was a major historical problem, no matter how you look at it. (Keller, p. 209).

1. Read I Corinthians 15. *Please: if there's no other passage you read in this class, read this.* When I was in seminary, my New Testament professor told us that this was the best summary of the Christian faith in the New Testament. Keller points out that in I Corinthians 15:6, Paul writes that “after that, (Jesus) appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have died.” Keller says “Paul was inviting anyone who doubted that Jesus had appeared to people after his death to go and talk to the eyewitnesses if they wished.” (Keller, p. 212). *Do you accept the resurrection fully, or are there aspects of the resurrection accounts that you find troubling?*

2. Keller points out (p. 215) that, in the Greco-Roman world, the human body was seen as weak, failing, and corruptible, and death was seen as “liberation” from the body. Resurrection to the Greco-Roman thinkers was “not only impossible, but totally undesirable. No soul, having gotten free from the body, would ever want it back.” On the other hand, the Jews “saw the material and physical world as good (God had created it, and it was good). Death was not seen as liberation from the material world, but as a tragedy.” Keller says that Jesus’ resurrection was “inconceivable” in that day. *Does this make the resurrection more, or less, plausible for you?*

3. Keller says that “no group of Jews ever worshipped a human being as God.” (Keller, p. 219). Yet, even Thomas says to Jesus in John 20:28 “my Lord and my God,” and “hundreds of Jews began worshipping Jesus as God.” (p. 218). Paul writes the words of an early Christian hymn in Philippians 2, before the separation from the Temple. “Virtually all early Christian leaders died for their faith.” No one got rich from it, no one wrote books or got movie rights from it, and no one recanted his or her story. Have you ever thought about that in connection with your faith? Would you be willing to die for your faith, too?

4. “If the resurrection of Jesus happened, however, that means there’s infinite hope and reason to pour ourselves out for the needs of the world.” (Keller, p. 220). *Why?*