Reader's Guide for The Reason for God
by Timothy Keller (Dutton, 2008)

When you read books that make a case for believing in God, you quickly get the feeling that they are written primarily for those who already believe. The authors of such books tend to gloss over the hardest questions about God.

Timothy Keller is different. Not only does he not shy away from the hard questions, he addresses them with the seriousness they deserve. And while *The Reason for God* can and should be read to great benefit by believers, it's a valuable resource for skeptics. Keller speaks to serious doubters, agnostics, and atheists with the same respect he would show to members of his Manhattan church. *The Reason for God* is worthwhile reading for believers who seek a more reasonable basis for Christian faith, and for nonbelievers who are open to reasoned arguments in favor of God's existence.

This reader's guide will help you explore some of the questions — and the corresponding defenses of God's existence — that you will find in *The Reason for God*. The discussion questions that follow are designed to be used in a group setting, with two or more people who are reading Keller's book. Discussing with other readers your own questions and your reactions to Keller's arguments will stimulate further reflection and will lead to new insights. Since most of the reader's guide questions grow out of the book's content, this guide will be most useful to bookclubs and reading groups that meet for periodic discussions as they read the book.

THE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1.
Early on, Timothy Keller states that nonbelievers are not people without beliefs, they are people whose beliefs vary from orthodox Christian teaching. As you begin your discussion of *The Reason for God*, it would be interesting to have each person summarize his or her basic beliefs as they relate to God, spirituality, and faith.

2.
In the Intro, the author endorses the importance of doubt, saying one's doubts "should only be discarded after long reflection" (xvii). Would you agree that a loosely held doubt is as pointless as loosely held religious faith? Keller continues: "Every doubt … is based on a leap of faith" (xvii). How do you feel about his implication that even doubt is a type of faith? Discuss some of the questions and doubts you would like to explore as you read this book.

3.
Addressing the argument that all religions are equal and there can't be just one true faith, Keller asks: "Do we really want to say that the Branch Davidians or religions requiring child sacrifice are not inferior to any other faith?" (p. 7). How would you respond to his question? Do you agree that most people rank religions qualitatively, even if outwardly they insist that all religions are equal? Discuss your responses.

4.
In chapter 2, Keller responds to the contention that a loving God could not allow suffering. He states: "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" (p. 23). Do you buy the argument that the absense of a clear answer doesn't rule out the possibility that a plausible — but hidden — explanation exists?

Why or why not? Do you feel that claiming that God has reasons for his actions that are beyond human reasoning is a cop-out? Or is this a valid argument when the topic is God and his transcendent ways of doing things?

5.

As he continues to examine the problem of pain, Keller writes: "… though Christianity does not provide the reason for each experience of pain, it provides deep resources for actually facing suffering with hope and courage rather than bitterness and despair" (p. 27). Have you ever experienced the hope and/or courage that he refers to? If so, describe your experience to others in the group.

6.

Paraphrasing C.S. Lewis, the author states: "… modern objections to God are based on a sense of fair-play and justice. People, we believe, ought not to suffer, be excluded, die of hunger or oppression. But the evolutionary mechanism of natural selection depends on death, destruction, and violence of the strong against the weak — these things are all perfectly natural. On what basis, then, does the atheist judge the natural world to be horribly wrong, unfair, and unjust" (p. 26). How would you respond to Keller's question? Does an allegiance to the laws of natural selection and survival of the fittest contradict human values that oppose suffering, discrimination, and the victimization of the poor and powerless? Why or why not?

7.

In chapter 3, Keller responds to criticism of absolute truth. He contends that in opposing the validity of a claim of absolute truth, the critic is necessarily making a truth claim of his own. As an example, Keller points to democratic values. "Western society is based on shared commitments to reason, rights, and justice even though there is no universally recognized definition of … any of these" (p. 39). Do you agree that the values of Western democracy constitute a type of secular absolute truth, and that adhering to the rightness of those values is no different than a Christian holding to the truth claims of Scripture? Why or why not?

8.

In chapter 4, the author looks at Christian hypocrisy and the problem it creates for those outside the church. The author agrees that people who do not claim to be Christians are often more ethical and more moral than those who attend church. Then he proposes an interesting explanation: churches might have a higher concentration of broken people, compared to the constituencies of other organizations, because people in need realize their condition and seek out assistance (see p. 53 — 54). Do you feel this explanation is too close to saying "don't judge Christianity by its weakest representatives"? Do you agree with the criticism that if Christianity really does transform lives, that the behavior of Christians should surpass that of the average human? Discuss your responses.

9.

What about the Bible's portrayal of a God of love who also judges his enemies? In chapter 5, Keller defends belief in a God of love who also is a God of wrath and judgment. If God loves his creation, it's understandable that God would oppose anything that does harm to his creation (see p. 73). Do you agree that God is big enough to encompass mercy and love, as well as judgment and wrath? Discuss your responses.

10.

On the question of a loving God sending people to hell, Keller writes that God gives people free choice in the matter. "In short, hell is simply one's

freely chosen identity apart from God on a trajectory into infinity" (p. 78). In other words, those who end up in hell chose that destination by rejecting God. How do you respond to such an assertion?

11.

In chapter 6, Keller looks at the argument that science has disproven such things as a creator, an afterlife, and supernatural intervention in the universe. To counter this argument, he writes: "When evolution is turned into an all-encompassing theory explaining absolutely everything we believe, feel, and do as the product of natural selection, then we are not in the arena of science, but of philosophy" (p. 87). In other words, believing that evolution rules out God and his intervention in the universe is a departure from science, and instead a decision to substitute one belief (evolution) for another (faith in God). How do you respond to this argument?

12.

The Bible is said to defend violence, to mandate puritanical sexual morality, and to maintain an anti-scientific bias. Why, then, would anyone in the 21st century take it seriously? In chapter 7, Keller responds. "To stay away from Christianity because part of the Bible's teaching is offensive to you assumes that if there is a God he wouldn't have any views that upset you. Does that belief make sense?" (p. 112). Do you agree that we should expect God — in that he is not a mere human — to take stands and enforce rules that run counter to our sense of how things should be done? Why or why not?

13.

Keller now begins to examine the primary bases for belief in God. In chapter 8, he refers to St. Augustine's argument that human desires — and especially, desires that can't be completely fulfilled — are clues to the reality of God. For example, he states: "… while hunger doesn't prove that the particular meal [such as a steak dinner] will be procured, doesn't the appetite for food in us mean that food exists? Isn't it true that innate desires correspond to real objects that can satisfy them, such as sexual desire (corresponding to sex) … and relational desires (corresponding to friendship)" (pp. 134—135). He goes on to argue that the human longing for meaning, love, and beauty are strong indicators that God exists. Do you agree that universal human desires point to God, or might there be other explanations? Discuss your responses.

14.

In chapter 9, the author states that the real challenge is not to prove that God exists, but to recognize that people already suspect that God exists. He points to the human sense that certain things are right and others are wrong. For example, protecting children from harm is right; ethnic cleansing is wrong. In light of these understandings, Keller writes: "[D]oesn't that mean you do believe that there is some kind of moral standard that people should abide by regardless of their individual convictions?" (p. 146). He continues: "We can't know that nature is broken in some way unless there is some super-natural standard of normalcy apart from nature by which we can judge right and wrong" (p. 155—156). Do you agree that a shared sense of right and wrong is an indication of God's existence? Discuss your responses.

15.

In chapter 10, Keller delves into the issue of sin and its consequences. He begins by positing that we already know sin exists: "It is hard to avoid the conclusion that there is something fundamentally wrong with the world" (p. 159). Do you agree that it's valid to define what is broken in the world as sin? Why or why not? And given all the things that are broken in the world, what questions does that raise in your mind about God?

16.
In chapter 11, the author contrasts religion with the message of the Christian gospel. He points out that religion is a set of rules and standards that determine what a person must do to obtain divine approval and enter heaven. In contrast, he states, the gospel makes it clear that no human can measure up to God's standard — which is perfection. That explains why God sent Jesus, his Son, to earth to die for the sins of humanity. The perfect God, in human flesh, was sacrificed for imperfect humanity. Keller writes: "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" (p. 181). How do you respond to Keller's characterization of religion in contrast to the message of the gospel? How do you react to his summary of the meaning of the gospel?

17.
In chapter 12, the author responds to the critique that "'The Christian God sounds like the vengeful gods of primitive times who needed to be appeased by human sacrifice.' Why can't God just accept everyone or at least those who are sorry for their wrongdoings?" (p. 187). To answer this question, Keller compares God to a person who has been wronged by another person. The injured party can exact revenge by making the offender suffer, or the wronged party can instead take the difficult path of forgiveness. When you forgive, you choose not to make the wrongdoer suffer for what he or she has done. The person who was wronged suffers instead. By forgiving the wrongdoer, Keller states, "[y]ou are absorbing the debt, taking the cost of it completely on yourself instead of taking it out of the other person. It hurts terribly. Many people would say it feels like a kind of death" (p. 189). Thus, God suffered the pain of his Son's death in order to forgive the sins of humanity. And because he did so, the wrongdoers (humanity) are freed from the debt of their wrongdoing. How do you feel about Keller comparing the pain of human forgiveness to God's act of sacrificing his Son to redeem humanity?

18.
Near the end of the book, the author concludes: "I believe 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). Thus, he does not present watertight proof of God's existence, but offers the message of Christianity as the most plausible explanation for the human condition and what we observe in the world around us. Do you feel Keller has made a compelling case? Why or why not?

19.
As a final discussion point, talk about how your views have changed as a result of reading *The Reason for God*. If you were skeptical about God when you started reading the book, are you less skeptical today? If you began this discussion as a believer, are you more confident now in what you believe? As you discuss your answers, consider any other areas you might like to explore with members of your reading group.