

The Apologetical Method of Tim Keller

By Wes Bredenhof

In the last number of years, many atheist books have come on the market. Authors like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins have done their best to convince the public that belief in God is not only misguided or wrong, but even dangerous and evil. Because of these efforts, Christians were brought again to state and defend their convictions. One of the more popular defenses has been Tim Keller's 2008 book, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. This book even made it on to the *New York Times* best-sellers list.

Tim Keller has become a well-known figure, not only in the United States, but around the world. I was recently in Cagayan de Oro, the Philippines. As I turned on the TV in my hotel room and flipped through the channels, I came across Tim Keller delivering a sermon or speech. His books have been translated into several languages. For instance, *The Reason for God* has been translated into such languages as Portuguese, Dutch, Chinese, and Korean. There's little question that Keller is a big celebrity in the Christian world.

Many Reformed Christians also find him appealing. He is, after all, the pastor of Redeemer PCA in New York City. The PCA (Presbyterian Church of America) has a range of local churches that span from broadly evangelical to strictly confessional, but most would locate the PCA in the world of Reformed churches. Certainly the PCA is a member church of the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Council (NAPARC), an organization which also includes the Canadian Reformed and United Reformed Churches. For some, the reasoning then goes like this: if Tim Keller is a PCA pastor, he must be Reformed. But such reasoning is fallacious – it's a non sequitur.¹

It's not my intention here to answer the broad question of whether or not Tim Keller is Reformed. Instead, I want to focus on his apologetical method and whether **it** is Reformed. As he attempts to defend and promote the Christian faith, does he use a method which reflects Reformed foundations and principles of apologetics? We have a limitation when we want to answer that question. To my knowledge, Tim Keller has not written directly about his method in any extensive systematic way. We have *The Reason for God* and that book is primarily addressed to unbelievers. It's primarily an illustration of his method, not an outline or explanation of the method itself. As we shall see, he does briefly identify his method in the book and we can examine that. However, it is the outworking of his method that will receive more of my attention.

Key Principles and Foundations

Before proceeding to look at Keller, let me outline for you some Reformed foundations and principles of apologetics. Some might be tempted to approach this area from a pragmatic perspective. With such a perspective, whatever works to convince unbelievers should meet with our approval and/or would meet with God's approval. However, Reformed believers

should immediately recognize the danger in such a pragmatic approach. Arminian evangelistic practices might “work” to bring someone to a confession of Christ – should they meet with our approval? Do they meet with God’s approval? We recognize that God can use whatever means he wants to accomplish his purposes and sometimes that might even include means that are lacking or incorrect. The Puritans used to say that God can strike a straight blow with a crooked stick. However, that does not absolve us of our responsibility to employ means that are ordained by God and therefore most honouring to him. In apologetics that means we have a responsibility to search for the method God would have us follow.

Where do we find God’s will in this respect? That question is about the foundations of Christian apologetics. We need to have a solid foundation where we can be certain we have God’s will in hand. That solid foundation is found in only one place: God’s Word. We say we believe in the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone is the authoritative source of theology and ethics. The Bible is the standard by which everything and everyone else is to be judged and evaluated. We need to apply *sola Scriptura* to apologetics too. The Bible must be our starting place. One of our foundational non-negotiable beliefs is the unailing truth of the written Word of God, that there is absolute, public, objective truth outside of ourselves in the Bible.

The Bible teaches us that the fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge (Prov. 1:7). Similarly, Psalm 111:10 says the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. Colossians 2:3 reminds us that in Christ are hidden **all** the treasures of wisdom and knowledge, and that must include the knowledge by which the Christian defends the knowledge of Christ. In Psalm 36:9 we find that it is in God’s light that we see light. Likewise, Psalm 18:28 tells us that God is the one who illumines our darkness.

All of this means that God’s Word must stand supreme over us in apologetics from beginning to end. The late Orthodox Presbyterian apologist Greg Bahnsen put it well when he wrote:

If the apologist treats the starting point of knowledge as something other than reverence for God, then unconditional submission to the unsurpassed greatness of God’s wisdom at the end of his argumentation does not really make sense.²

In other words, unless we start with the presupposition that God’s Word is true and authoritative, we have betrayed our cause. We cannot expect God’s blessing if we betray his authority at any point. Therefore, when we discuss method, our starting point must be the Word of God and indeed, Scripture must guide us throughout. Any method which does not consistently employ *sola Scriptura* cannot claim to be Reformed.

We should expect such a method to include a proper understanding of God. According to Scripture, God is independent of his creation. He does not need or depend on anyone or anything else. He exists entirely of his own strength and power. Furthermore, God alone is absolute and he alone is autonomous – a law unto himself. God is incomparable. As Psalm 89:6 says, “For who in the heavens can be compared to the LORD?” Building on that, God is

transcendent, highly exalted beyond us and all creatures. Yet he is also personal and he interacts with people in a variety of ways. Here we can think especially of the activities of the Triune God. He loves us as Father. He lives in us with his Holy Spirit. The Spirit works with the Word to create faith and draw us into a vital union with Christ. Therefore, we say that God is not only transcendent, but also immanent. He is near and he is involved with our lives.

We also confess from Scripture that God is the creator of all things and he upholds and sustains all things. Paul says in Acts 17:28, "In him we live and move and have our being." In Romans 11:36, he writes, "For from him and through him and to him are all things." The same thought is expressed in Colossians 1:17 though in reference to Christ, "And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together." Without the Triune God, nothing can exist. Truth, knowledge, reason, facts, laws – everything depends on God's existence. The Bible tells us that these things exist because God exists. Recognizing that goes a long way to establishing an apologetic method that gives proper honour to God's Word.

A method that consistently honours *sola Scriptura* will also have a proper understanding of humanity. Man was created in the image of God (sharing some of God's attributes), but yet still with limitations. Man was created dependent on God. The fall into sin led Adam and Eve to the desire for autonomy. They wanted to be free of God – to be a law unto themselves. Fallen man rebels against his Creator and wants to live his own life without any interference from above. The problem for the unbeliever is that this autonomy can only ever be a pretended autonomy. The unbeliever deceives himself into thinking he is independent of God. Meanwhile, Scripture tells us he is suppressing the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1:18). Deep in his heart, the unregenerate knows that there is a holy God with a holy law, but because of sin he continues to assert his independence (Romans 1:32). He will also sometimes act, think, and speak in terms of the absolutes embedded in the Christian worldview. These inconsistencies only confirm the biblical teaching that unbelievers hold to their unbelief as a form of foolishness and rebellion. Ultimately, sin is irrational and illogical.

Regeneration changes this picture. The believer acknowledges his complete dependence on God in all things. In principle, the believer can consistently receive all manner of revealed truth from God. Yet in practice, it is true that the believer still struggles with sin. Therefore, there will be inconsistencies also in a believer's life and in his thinking and speaking. Still, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, Christians are open to having these inconsistencies exposed and resolved.

There is much more that could be said about a Reformed apologetical method. But let me end here by pointing you to one last key biblical teaching related to the doctrine of man and the fall into sin: the antithesis. This teaching, so strongly stressed by Abraham Kuyper and others in our Reformed theological heritage, is in grave danger of being lost in our day. This is what the Bible says: people are lost in falsehood and in principle unable to recognize truth, and certainly not able in principle or practice to recognize saving truth, or they are in allegiance with the source of all truth, the one who can save. You are on one side of the antithesis or the other.

Second Corinthians 6:15 says, “What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever?” Amos 3:3 confirms this, “Can two walk together unless they be agreed?” There is no neutral ground between the believer and the unbeliever. Though they live on the same earth, they are in different, antithetical worlds. One is completely given over to pretended autonomy and the other confesses dependence on God and his revelation. The only way forward in apologetics is to apply the Word of God. The Holy Spirit will use the Word to open the eyes of an unbeliever and give him the heart transplant he desperately needs. A Reformed method therefore must be a biblical method from beginning to end.

Tim Keller’s Method

Now we can proceed to outline Keller’s method and consider whether it is biblical. Again, we can only restrict ourselves here to *The Reason for God*. This is a well-written and persuasive book. Keller is an effective communicator, both on the printed page and from behind the pulpit. He is winsome and comes across as someone who understands his audience. His gifts are not in question. That said, we need to recognize that persuasion is not an indicator of either truth or a correct method. After all, many people are persuaded to wrong positions by fallacious or wicked arguments.

As mentioned earlier, *The Reason for God* is addressed to skeptics, not to Christians. It is an effort to commend “belief in age of skepticism.” The title might lead one to think that Keller is arguing for bare belief in a deity. However, the book is clear enough that he is seeking ultimately to win people over to the Christian faith and worldview. For example, he has chapters on sin, the gospel, the cross, and the resurrection.

One question to ask is whether Keller begins and ends with the Bible in addressing these subjects. In general, Tim Keller is someone who seems to take the Bible seriously. In the Introduction to *The Reason for God* he says that he came to New York City to establish a church that would hold to orthodox, historic tenets of Christianity, including the infallibility of the Bible.³ Excellent!

However, I wonder whether Keller is consistent in applying his commitment to the authority of Scripture in his apologetics. He describes his method as “critical rationality.” This is how he introduces it to readers of *The Reason for God*:

It assumes that there are some arguments that many or even most rational people will find convincing, even though there is no argument that will be persuasive to everyone regardless of viewpoint. It assumes that some systems of belief are more reasonable than others, but that all arguments are rationally avoidable in the end. That is, you can always find reason to escape it that is not sheer bias or stubbornness. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we can’t evaluate beliefs, only that we should not expect conclusive proof, and to demand it is unfair. Not even scientists proceed that way.⁴

Keller's method, as described here, does not do justice to the Word of God. It appeals to fallen man as a rational creature and it assumes that the unbeliever's intellect has not been affected by the fall into sin. Further in the same section, he speaks of the need to find theories that are "empirically verifiable." He concludes by proposing to the unbeliever that we weigh the evidence for various religious beliefs and opt for those which are "the most reasonable." This method demonstrates a failure to reckon with the effects of sin on the mind. Keller therefore flatters the unbeliever instead of confronting him with his plight. By starting with reason, rather than Scripture, Keller really betrays the cause he seeks to defend and promote.

This is further illustrated when he discusses the relationship between science and Christianity, specifically when he addresses the matter of origins. While he rejects evolution as an "all-encompassing theory" or worldview, Keller believes that "God guided some kind of process of natural selection."⁵ He discusses how Christians have different understandings of the relationship between science and the Bible, and he leaves the door open for theistic evolution. In so doing, he wants to make the Christian faith seem reasonable to doubters. After all, who could be so unreasonable as to question the assured conclusions of science? In Keller's approach here, science trumps Scripture and Scripture has to be reinterpreted to fit the reasonable conclusions of science. This is lamentable and indicates an inconsistency in his method.⁶

Another notable example is found in his chapter dealing with sin. Keller recognizes that many today find the concept of sin offensive or ludicrous. He suggests that perhaps this is because the Christian doctrine of sin is being misunderstood. Keller then seeks to explain "the meaning of sin" ...by appealing to the definition provided by Søren Kierkegaard, "Sin is: in despair not wanting to be oneself before God."⁷ Keller then makes a jump, identifying Kierkegaard's reasonable sounding view with the Bible:

So, according to the Bible, the primary way to define 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.⁸

Keller assumes that Kierkegaard's position is the biblical position. The only appeal he makes to Scripture itself is to the first commandment, "have no other gods before me." But that commandment says nothing about one's identity and so it is a long leap from Kierkegaard's definition to there. Why start with Kierkegaard, not exactly a paragon of biblical orthodoxy? Why not start with 1 John 3:4, "sin is lawlessness"? Or, since Keller is a Presbyterian, why not start with QA 14 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "Sin is disobeying or not conforming to God's law in any way." As it is, Keller's failure to start with Scripture puts him in danger of defining or portraying morality in a way that fails to account for the holy character and nature of God as the very basis for morality.

The problems only continue when Keller discusses the consequences of sin. He describes the personal, social, and cosmic consequences of sin. However, he fails to draw out the eternal consequences of sin in this chapter. Yes, in an earlier chapter, he does attempt to answer the question “How Can a Loving God Send People to Hell?” But even there, the idea that an eternal, conscious hell is a divine punishment for sin is muted at best. Keller prefers to emphasize that “hell is simply one’s freely chosen identity apart from God on a trajectory into infinity.”⁹ Does the Bible teach this? How does this square with the suffering and death of Christ? Did Christ freely take on a “chosen identity apart from God” as he experienced hell for us on the cross? No, the Bible teaches that hell is a place where one cannot escape from God and his wrath (Matt. 25:41,46; Rom. 2:5,6). The unrepentant wicked will have an eternal identity intimately close to God’s hand of judgment.¹⁰ On the cross, Jesus was attacked by the wrath of God in the place of the elect. In theology, we say that his sacrifice was a propitiatory substitution. Keller does not properly present the eternal consequences of human sin and so he is also weak here on the full meaning of the cross.

On these important points, Keller’s method fails not only to build consistently on the foundation of Scripture, but he also misrepresents God and inadequately addresses the unbeliever in sin. With his attempts to be “reasonable” and avoiding offense as much as possible, he is minimizing the unbeliever’s real problem. The unbeliever’s real problem is rebellion against a holy God. The unbeliever attacks God’s honour by suppressing the truth in unrighteousness. By downplaying this, Keller fails to work out consistently the biblical doctrine of the antithesis. He is really doing the unbeliever no favour in this regard. Rather than being flattered with apparent intellectual sophistication, unbelievers need to be confronted with the fact that they are rebelliously living in God’s world. They eat God’s food. They breathe God’s air. They use God’s math to take of their family finances. They use God’s physics to travel virtually anywhere they want. Yet they pretend that this Triune God does not exist, or, if there is some kind of God, he will not judge and justly punish them for their sin.

At one point in *The Reason for God*, Keller comes close to making this kind of biblical case. It’s in chapters eight and nine. At the end of chapter eight, “The Clues of God,” Keller writes the following:

Those who argue against the existence of God go right on using induction, language, and their cognitive faculties, all of which makes far more sense in a universe in which a God has created and supports them all by his power...I don’t want to argue why God may exist. I want to demonstrate that you already know that God does exist. I’d like to convince the reader that, whatever you may profess intellectually, belief in God is an unavoidable, ‘basic’ belief that we cannot prove but can’t not know. We *know* God is there. That is why even we believe with all our minds that life is meaningless, we simply can’t live that way.¹¹

In the following chapter, Keller develops a case for God in connection with morality. He discusses different options for moral obligation and demonstrates how each fails. He

concludes, “If there is no God, then there is no way to say any one action is ‘moral’ and another ‘immoral,’ but only ‘I like this.’”¹² Keller indeed attempts to demonstrate that the unbeliever already knows that God is there and he is behind our sense of moral obligation. This is the best part of *The Reason for God*. I wish Keller had developed this argument further and built his book around it, because this actually is a biblical argument and approach. It fits with what Paul writes in Acts 17:28 and Romans 11:36. He could have developed it further by arguing how science, logic, mathematics -- everything! -- can only be adequately accounted for in a biblical Christian worldview.

More than one reviewer has drawn a parallel between Tim Keller and C. S. Lewis. Keller himself repeatedly references Lewis.¹³ On at least one occasion, Lewis used a similar argument to the one found at the end of chapter eight and through chapter nine of *The Reason for God*. But more often, we find Lewis using the traditional apologetic approaches that had been developed in the Church of England, especially under the influence of Bishop Butler. This approach was consistent with the Arminianism of Butler and others. Lewis, too, was not Reformed in his theology and so it does not surprise one to find him mostly using a method of apologetics from which a Reformed theologian would dissent. But Keller is a PCA pastor. On paper, he is a Presbyterian, committed to the Westminster Standards. At one point, he even taught at Westminster Theological Seminary – the very institution where Cornelius Van Til led a Reformation in apologetics in the last century. Unfortunately, *The Reason for God* bears little evidence of that Reformation.

Perhaps God has used Keller’s book and his ministry to truly bring people to Christ. I rejoice if that is the case. But because of the shortcomings outlined above, I cannot recommend the method of Keller. We need to strive for faithfulness to the Word of God in our apologetics. That faithfulness needs to be consistent – we have to honour the authority of the LORD from beginning to end. Only when we do that can we expect that our gracious God will bless our efforts.

¹ A non sequitur is a logical fallacy where the conclusion does not follow from the premise(s). In this case being PCA cannot guarantee that one is consistently and confessionally Reformed.

² Greg L. Bahnsen, *Van Til’s Apologetic: Readings & Analysis* (Phillipsburg: P & R Publishing, 1998), 3.

³ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton, 2008), xiv.

⁴ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 120.

⁵ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 94.

⁶ For a Reformed treatment of these issues, see Jason Lisle, *The Ultimate Proof of Creation: Resolving the Origins Debate* (Green Forest: Master Books, 2009).

⁷ Quoted by Keller, *The Reason for God*, 162.

⁸ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 162. The emphasis is Keller's.

⁹ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 78.

¹⁰ But what about 2 Thess. 1:9 you might ask? The NIV translates, "They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power." One solution might be to understand "the presence of the Lord" to mean "the blessed presence of the Lord," his presence in which he blesses people. However, a better solution is found in the translators' footnotes of the ESV. They note that the Greek can also be translated, "They will suffer the eternal destruction that comes from the presence of the Lord..."

¹¹ Keller, *The Reason for God*, 141-142. The emphasis is Keller's.

¹² Keller, *The Reason for God*, 153.

¹³ See Keller, *The Reason for God*, 269. Footnote 10 suggests that Keller's method of "critical rationality" was drawn from Lewis.