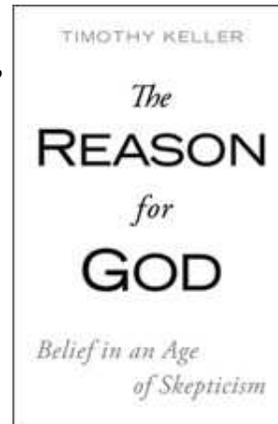


# Thoughts on Christianity and the Church

September 07 2009: Keller and Christian Community

I've finished the book now. The last two chapters are really great; worth reading and discussing together in a group. In fact, speaking of groups, in the last chapter, the Epilogue, where Keller lays out the necessities of becoming a Christian, he includes joining with a faith community, a church.

For me, this brings it full circle. In the introduction, Tim Keller describes his own journey into faith from the chaos of his early church experiences and college education. He says there were three barriers to an authentic faith in his way:



- **Intellectual:** Struggling with challenging questions the existence of God and the truth of Christianity. Much like the ones addressed in his book, which of course is why the book was written.
- **Personal Encounter:** Not having experienced God's presence firsthand. Practicing the religious devotions of your parents can only take you so far. Acknowledging the power and beauty of God in creation is not quite enough.
- **Social:** Lacking Keller's "third camp" - not a church of religious moralists, not a team of social activists, but a community of authentic believers.

That resonates deeply with me. Some time ago, I wrote up my [Christian journey](#), and it includes the intellectual (largely via creationism) and experiential (God speaking to me). So for me, those barriers have been overcome. The remaining one, the search for the authentic church, is of course largely the subject of my thoughts here!

Yes, I'm searching for an authentic church, an effective church, effective in the mission of Christ by virtue of nature rather than programming or leader-imposed strategy. Not a "perfect" church (I know none exists), and not merely a church that is agreeable to me or that I "like". Not necessarily a different church than the one I'm in; rather, I could hope that the church I'm in (and all those near by) could be transformed.

Keller affirms this search, first by stating that every believer needs to be in community with other believers - that is, part of a "church" - and then secondly, by recognizing that the church search is problematic.

The church of Jesus Christ is therefore like the ocean. It is enormous and diverse. Like the ocean there are warm and clear spots and deadly cold spots, places you can enter easily without danger and places where it will immediately whisk you away and kill you. I realize how risky it is to tell my

readers that they should seek out a church. I don't do it lightly, and I urge them to do so with the utmost care.

It's the kind of church that Keller would hope new believers would prosper in that I'm searching for.

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In a related vein, in chapter ten, Tim Keller defines mortal sin as "not just the doing of bad things, but the making of good things into *ultimate* things." Or, in building one's *identity* in something other than Christ. He gives romantic love as an example. Yes, I've known some girls who find their identity in having a boyfriend; if they don't have one, they feel inadequate and desperate, and if they do, it's all they can think or talk about. He gives another example, of people finding their identity in their work. And yes, I've known some people at Raytheon, particularly career-oriented upward-mobile manager types who are just like that.

But it makes me stop, and wonder: Am I finding my identity in the critique of the Western church?

My grandmother attended a ruined church in Pryor, Oklahoma. We visited there a few times; ten to twenty middle-age to senior people, an influential man who felt he owned the church, couldn't hold on to a pastor for more than three years before asking for him to resign. Utterly ineffective. People would ask her, "Bonnie, why do you keep going to that church?" She would answer, "I serve Christ, not that church."

Then, last Sunday, Pastor Travis suggested in his sermon that some people in the church see their role as "protecting the purity of the church". I've known people like that (mostly older ones, with a moralistic traditionalist viewpoint), and I agree with Travis - we don't need those kind.

Now, there is another church in Pryor, larger, more active, unquestionably more effective (but of course not perfect). My grandmother could have "served Christ, not the church" and likely have gotten more return on her investment than in the little church she stayed at. Furthermore, if the church would be well-served by the departure of the moralists, how much more by the efforts of reformers?

So I recognize there is a fine line between being a sinner and a pest, and being a positive change agent. I need help to stay well on the right side of that line.

... Of course, I need an authentic, effective church to help me with that...

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## September 07 2009: "Reason" and Epistemology

There's a very interesting aspect of Keller's book that I appreciate. While the book is structured with the two parts (answering objections, and reasons to believe), there is the introduction to the book, and also an "intermission" chapter between the two parts.

These two entities are quite important on their own! Often when I read a book, I just scan the introduction in order to get to the "meat" starting in the first chapter. In this case, the introduction is worth the price of the book! Now, in the introduction and the "intermission", there are two points that I find **very important**:

### **Doubting your doubts**

Keller addresses the skeptics,

It would be inconsistent to require more justification for Christian belief than you do for your own, but that is frequently what happens.

After I read that passage, I realized that I've observed that situation myself. The skeptics I engage (which I don't very often, since it never goes anywhere useful) seem to take the position that I believe *something* whereas they believe *nothing*, therefore the burden of proof is on me with my positive beliefs. However, belief in *nothing* is still belief - is still "religion", as I occasionally point out - and they have to defend those beliefs just as much as they expect us Christians to defend ours. Going beyond defense of belief, though, is the question of *doubt*. Keller and others have observed that skeptics are just as keen on "proselytizing" as they accuse their religious opponents of being (another indication that atheism is itself a religion), trying to raise doubts in their opponents' minds to the point of "converting". Keller challenges the skeptics to consider doubting their own positions.

### **Strong Rationalism vs. Critical Rationality**

While it isn't original with him, Keller serves the purpose of his apologetic by reflecting on the difference between these two approaches to argument:

- **Strong Rationalism** is the expectation of the "airtight" argument, with logic so clear and unassailable that all rational beings must accept it.
- **Critical Rationality** is the use of "good enough" arguments, convincing to most rational beings, but shy of inescapable.

There are very few inescapable arguments, certainly about religion. "Cogito ergo sum" is certainly one; I can deny the objective existence of everything but the person doing the denying. In the context of the book, there are variations on the "self-defeating proposition" argument, such as with postmodernism:

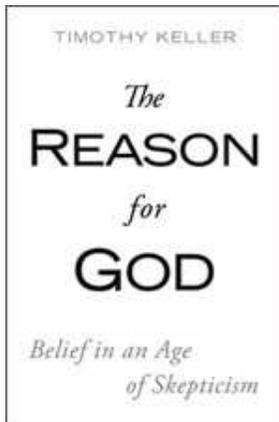
"There is no such thing as absolute truth" is itself an absolute truth statement.

I really appreciated the story of Keller's counselling times with the seeker who was requiring that "airtight" argument for Christianity before he would believe. But Strong Rationalism is itself supported by no "airtight" argument (another self-defeating proposition). Once the seeker understood this, he was ready to accept Critical Rationality as a guideline.

Put together, it seems typical for skeptics to apply Strong Rationalism to the Christians, and demand an inescapable "proof" for the existence of God (which, of course, there is none), but inconsistently fail to apply Strong Rationalism to their own beliefs. Honest seekers need to recognize the difference between Strong Rationalism and Critical Rationality, and put the former on the shelf.

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September 06 2009: Skeptics, Evolution, and the Bible



In Chapter Six of his book "[The Reason for God](#)", Tim Keller addresses the tension between "science" and the Bible on two issues, the plausibility of supernatural miracles, and Creation. The first of these issues he deals with summarily by pointing out the limits of Science as an arbiter of truth. Science cannot prove that there is no truth outside of scientific truth. Miracles may be unscientific, but that hardly makes them impossible.

'nuf ced.

The other issue forms the kernel of some fair bit of controversy about Keller's book among evangelical reviewers. His apologetic

takes two points:

## The Creation story is not part of essential Christian doctrine

Fair enough. In fact, in the book's introduction, describing the founding and nature of Redeemer Presbyterian, he says they uphold "the infallibility of the Bible, the deity of Christ, the necessity of spiritual regeneration." Nothing about how to interpret that infallible Bible. Elsewhere he refers to the great Creeds of the Church. Nothing about Creation in those.

You don't have to believe that God created the universe in six literal days, as described in Genesis 1. Hugh Ross doesn't, Francis Collins doesn't... Tim Keller doesn't... and I'm not about to question the veracity of their claim to saving faith. Of course, you don't have to believe in the Flood, or that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were historical people, or that the Bible is not the product of a human oral tradition, or that homosexuality is a sin. But the farther you go, the harder it gets to *maintain and defend* that faith. This is *exactly* where the mainstream churches, like the Presbyterian Church, find themselves today.

## Christians are not monolithic regarding Origins

Again, *for the purpose of diffusing the skeptic's objections*, this is fair enough. Keller is quite right when he points out that Origins, and the interpretation of Genesis 1, is an "intramural debate". The skeptic cannot paint all Christians with the same brush, or lump them all in the "young earth creationist" category.

But by making this the end of the argument, Keller is tacitly agreeing with the skeptics that Evolution (in the "slime-to-man" sense) is true, and the "young earth creationists" really are a bunch of ignorant Bible thumpers. Keller is honest about his opinion that Genesis 1 is "poetry" and Genesis 2 is "narrative". However, I think his chapter would have been stronger if he had recognized the apologetic value of the argument that many intelligent, scientifically trained and degreed Christians believe there is good physical evidence that evolution has not and cannot occur (in the "macro" sense), and that the world is not nearly old enough as required by evolutionism. Even if he admits he doesn't believe those Christian scientists are right.

### **But you put them together and...**

you end up where Ken Ham observes Western Christianity is now. Two hundred years ago or so, the Presbyterian minister would not have interpreted Genesis 1 as anything but literal. But after "science" has discovered a materialist explanation for life, the Presbyterian minister feels obligated to interpret Genesis 1 as poetry in order to accommodate this "science". Look where the Presbyterian denominations are now. Ken Ham's observations of young people hanging up on Christianity over the age of the earth and the "infallibility of the Bible" are well-made.

### **But Keller's church is successful...**

Yep. Keller compromises on Genesis 1, *but still provides robust reasons to believe in Christ*, and his church is successful at reaching skeptics. Two things come to my mind:

- Would providing solid reasons to believe in a literal six-day creation make Redeemer's appeal even stronger? Maybe it would. Maybe soft-peddling it would be okay; I wonder if Redeemer soft-pedals the homosexual issue. As noted above, positions on Genesis 1 and homosexuality are not essential to salvation, but they probably are for discipleship.
- After twenty years, Redeemer is still a "first generation" church. If Redeemer compromises on Genesis 1 when teaching the children of the new believers, perhaps they will experience the same "youth flight" that Ken Ham's book describes. However, I suspect it would not be as great, if this teaching includes the apologetic emphasis Keller appears to be making to the overall church.

So the apologetic content of Redeemer's teaching largely compensates for the Genesis 1 compromise. I suppose given a choice between Redeemer's model, and a (typical) church that affirms the literalness of Genesis 1 but never gets beyond Bible story and "life application" teaching, I would give the former a better hope for success.

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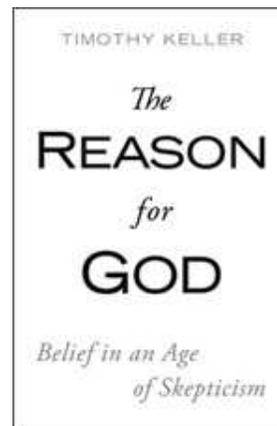
### September 05 2009: The Reason for God

Like I've mentioned elsewhere, I get [World Magazine](#), and read it pretty much cover-to-cover. Yes, it is right-of-center politically, and I believe most Christians should

find themselves there, if they think about it with their minds instead of their emotions (emotions are usually bad for thinking with). But I don't want to get bogged down with politics, since I'm not terribly political myself, and I think that sort of thing gets covered adequately elsewhere, like [Hugh Hewitt's blog](#). But like any good news magazine, it includes reviews of books, particularly those of interest to its target audience (Christians). And not just reviews, but often, interviews with the authors. That's how I first found out about Tim Keller, of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York City, and his book, "[The Reason for God](#)".

So I got it - at the Dallas airport, of all places! What I have found so far (I'm not quite done) is a pretty good "apologetic" with two parts:

- The first part (chapters one through seven) is a response to typical objections that skeptics raise to Christianity, such as "how can a good God exist with all the evil and suffering in the world?" and "science (evolution) has disproved God".
- The second part (chapters eight through fourteen) are responses to the question "why should I believe in God?"



I note with interest that both parts are *NOT* theoretical, theological, academic exercises, but the result of Rev. Keller's interactions with real New Yorkers as he founded and pastored Redeemer Presbyterian. I have two reactions to this discovery. One is, I think I already knew that Presbyterian ministers were more academically trained than your typical Baptist preacher. This certainly shone through with Dr. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Presbyterian. And with the pastor of Northminster Presbyterian here in Tucson, although in this case (and the general downward trend of the PCUSA), the double-edge nature of that academic training, and the potential for taking the Bible lightly, is pretty clear. Of course, I've known some Baptist preachers who were just as accommodating of evolutionism as Rev. Keller is (more on this later). But Keller's facility with engaging skeptics with philosophy and logic is enviable.

The other reaction I have is amazement of how timely my reading of this book is, coming right after Ken Ham's "Already Gone". Ken Ham and Britt Beemer document how young people fall away from the church as a result of the ambiguous Christian training they receive. Tim Keller describes his own journey in exactly those terms. Ken Ham recommends instructing young people in apologetics. Redeemer Presbyterian is founded on apologetics. In fact, in the introduction, Keller relates how his family moved to Manhattan to start a church (I assume he was responding to God's calling, however he received it) in a very sophisticated and skeptical climate. Twenty years later, Redeemer has 5,000 attenders, mostly young, single, and of various ethnicities. When Christian visitors come to check out Redeemer (chapter three), they find a very traditional service (no "gimmicks" or "avant-garde" music or "exceptionally hip settings", but the members are committed to living an authentic Christianity in community. Redeemer has (or used to have) after-service Question and Answer sessions

(chapter five), and Keller occasionally hosts lectures or discussions about Christianity in area homes. In another place (chapter nine), he describes "putting on his philosophy professor hat" when counselling young skeptics in the area.

Now, I'm sure there is more to Redeemer Presbyterian than philosophical, apologetical sermons on Sunday Morning. I'm sure there is some expositional or life-application teaching somewhere. I don't know (yet) if they emphasize cell groups or life coaches or whatever. But it is pretty clear that there is an intentionality at work here, more than an uncritical surface traditionalism that doesn't work in Tucson, much less be the foundation for a church start. I don't care about the music, or the format of the "worship" service, as long as some core principle of the church **works**. Clearly, at Redeemer Presbyterian in Manhattan, it does. And clearly, sound apologetics is part of it.

In fact, as I started reading the book, it occurred to me that this was a *contra* Atheism book. Of course it is; that's clear from the title. But why should the story of a church, and a pastor's calling be an answer to atheism? Why are so many books (and web articles) in the West a response to atheism? Why not Islam, or Buddhism? Because Redeemer is in an atheist culture. Churches in the West are in an atheist culture. A church or pastor, or generally a Christian, that lives in and engages an atheist culture with *contra* atheist apologetics is being... *missional*. Urban Tucson, where I live, where Central Baptist is located, is an atheist culture. To be *missional*, we must...

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## August 29 2009: Two Church Plants

Earlier this summer, I was cruising the Web in a search for "emerging" or "postmodern" churches in Tucson, with the idea that I could visit, observe, network, and see what (if anything) could be transportable to a sidebar activity at Central Baptist. There's actually not very much, it seems, but one of them, "1Focus", advertised to be a church start on the south side, on Valencia near the airport. I figured I would look in on one of their "preview" services".

When I visited, I found the usual "church start" formula - a group of out-of-state volunteers\* who had done neighborhood canvassing and holding "block parties" and other publicity activities and were now being "greeters" and leading the music part of the traditional-format service; the church start pastor delivering a life-application sermon (category: strengthening marriage); and a small group (about ten) of younger suburban couples mostly from the new housing developments at either end of Valencia.



[\* Actually, the volunteers were from the pastor's wife's home church in Louisiana, and included her parents who had come for the additional (primary? secondary?) purpose

of seeing their newborn grandchild.]

Knowing the format, and that the out-of-state volunteers would not be around for the next "preview service", I mentioned to the church planter guy that the young people at Central Baptist had helped with church starts before, and we even had a little musical group who could lead their singing time. About two weeks before the next "preview service", he contacted me, expressed interest, and arranged to observe our music group at our next Thursday night practice time. This ended up in an arrangement for us to show up at the next "preview service".

When we got there, we found that we were *not* going to do music; the worship leader from a local (so far successful) startup church was going to lead with his guitar, solo. There was no projector, no signs to put out, not much setting up to do. Our older girls went to help in the nursery (two babies), and everyone else greeted - not very many attendees. As the service got underway, what we learned was that the pastor and his wife had been reviewing the lackluster attendance at their "preview services" thus far, and her mounting post-partum depression, and had decided just that week to hang it up. She was flying back to Louisiana that very week, and he would follow after breaking the lease on their house and packing up all their stuff.

So that's *two* church starts that have been shot out from under me.



Now, just over a year ago, I had visited First Baptist Church, and found a new pastor who was trying to save the work there. He had succeeded in turning out some of the toxic deacons and the party who wanted to keep things as they were, and also raise some capital by selling the old educational building across the street to a developer for conversion into condominiums. He had also arranged with a ethnic hispanic church to meet in the building and share the load. He was also intending to start a new church as a First Baptist "branch" in the northwest suburbs, at least in part to be a "feeder" for the downtown fellowship. Pretty ambitious.

Recently I have learned that his attempt to rescue First Baptist had failed. The historic church ended their fellowship (what little there was left to end)... but John Johnson did *not* end his Tucson ministry: [Cross Life](#), which appears to be based in the northwest suburbs (where he lives) but still involved (meeting) at the First Baptist property. I don't know how they are doing, and it's going to be hard to tell - because of the different emphasis he is taking.

At our "feeling out" meeting, the 1Focus pastor confided that they were disappointed with the turnout for their "preview services", and they were going to switch to having a cell group or "Bible Study" in their home, to build up a "core group" fellowship. I heartily applauded that. My understanding of [Saddleback](#) is that it started with the Warrens building a core group in their home. My friend Ben Barfield started his

successful [Common Grounds](#) church as a house church. I think Element might have been more successful if we had started small, as a house church, instead of jumping right into the "preview service" mode. As it was, the only "core group" that ever formed was the worship band.

As near as I can tell, Cross Life is going to structure primarily on the cell group, or "Life Group" or "Life Lab" as they call it. No mention of a "service" or a Sunday morning or Saturday evening meeting time. No advertisement of "upbeat music" or "life application message", as is the usual fare for startups. The short intro on their website is all about their small groups. And, it will at least have a downtown presence!

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The contrast between these church start attempts, combined with what I know of other local church starts and my own experience with the Element failure, is instructive. To generalize (perhaps improperly):

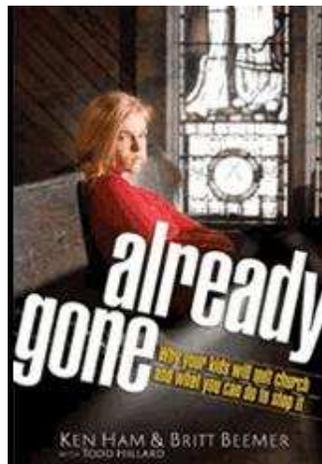
- Putting the focus on the traditional "worship service" is iffy. It *can* work in a suburban setting - and I could speculate on those young suburbanite families that fit the pattern in the "Already Gone" study of young people with a church culture background who fall away but intend to return after they have children. It doesn't seem to work very well in a more urban setting.
- Trying to "rescue" a moribund church is a long shot. You start with the attitudes and expectations already present (which are toxic to some extent), and add the necessity of a "worship service" (see above). First off, some house-cleaning of the old fellowship seems to be unavoidable. Secondly, it doesn't seem possible to draw a new work into an existing traditional church; sort of a "new wine in old wineskins" problem. It might work better the other way around.
- It has a better chance of success - not to mention being more biblical and certainly more basically Christian - to start with the intimacy of a home fellowship, or even a cell group that meets at a church facility. Building a core group of people with a vision and a focus on Jesus is probably a better foundation from which to move into a more traditional format (if indeed it is necessary or even appropriate) than trying to do it "cold".

So I'm thinking, if anything is going to happen at Central (or any other small, struggling urban church), it needs to start as a sideline, apart from the church "proper", and *not* be preoccupied with a formal "worship service".

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## August 4 2009: "Already Gone": Proposed Solution

I've read a few other books in the "gloom and doom for the church" category. Some are just that, with no hope. Most, though, at least propose things we can do about the problem. The second half (chapters 5, 6, and 7) of [Already Gone](#) propose a solution to the problems identified in the first half:



- 61% of the young people in conservative, Bible-believing churches will leave (and it's much worse in other churches).
- Sunday School is actually *harmful* to the spiritual health of young people.
- Roughly half of those young people, who tend to not believe the Bible, have no intention of returning.
- The other half tend to believe the Bible return occasionally for special services, and intend to return after having children, even though they view the church as largely hypocritical and irrelevant.

The root causes of the problem, as assessed by Ken Ham and AIG from the results of their survey, are:

- The lack of apologetics training for all ages to defend the accuracy of the Bible, particularly the reliability of Genesis chapters 1-11
- The failure of church members to live in accordance to the teachings of the Bible

Chapter 5 aims at the first of these. The first point made is the loss of confidence in biblical authority in historical teachings like the Resurrection if the biblical authority of teachings like the Creation are surrendered. The second demonstrates the futility of trying to rescue our decaying culture from the top down, and how AIG intends to help change hearts and minds, which may (hopefully) result in bottom-up cultural change. The third point is how many churches respond to the problem with a "placebo" - an instead-of "fix", like a seeker-sensitive sermon or an entertaining music show on Sunday morning. Ham proposes that we address the real problem by teaching answers to real, current skeptical challenges that the research indicates are troubling young people today - perhaps this is what he really means by "being flexible with cultural forms".

Chapter 6 aims at the second issue. It starts out (p. 118) by stating two roadblocks to people taking the church seriously:

1. The "Church" has become an institution that no longer the characteristics and priorities described in the Word of God.
2. People within the Church are not living authentically Christian lives based on the Word of God.

It goes on to recap the top six objections to the traditional church by unbelievers as reported by Kinnaman in his "unchristian" book. Then it considers the unbiblical "traditional" concept of church a lot of church people have, as discussed in the Viola/Barna "Pagan Christianity" book. It continues to look at alternative forms to traditional church, such as "Virtual Church" (via the Internet), Home Church, and Para-church ministries (such as Answers in Genesis is itself). The chapter ends with a reminder that the church - a gathering of individual believers - is not optional for believers, that it's a good thing to invite those absent young people to church. Most importantly, while you as an individual can't do much to change the hypocritical church climate, *YOU* can be faithful as an individual to live an authentic Christian life.

Well, that hits me where I live! Certainly an authentically biblical church will be composed of individuals who commit themselves to "living truth". But if the other individuals in a given church aren't interested in "living truth", what are you as an individual going to do? You kind of have to... leave... also... and hope to fall in with a group of like-minded individuals.

In the last chapter, Ken Ham declares a "revolution" (sounds familiar), a new Reformation, and presents manifestos for four groups to undertake:

- Parents
- Christian Educators (Sunday School teachers, or professional teachers in Christian private schools)
- Youth Pastors (the shortest section)
- Senior Pastors (the longest section)

Each manifesto contains the Call to Defend the Word and Live the Word, a Mandate for the person filling that role, and some Action Points to consider in the pursuit of the Mandate. There are corresponding appendices for each of the four roles with resources (which looks sort of like a commercial for Answers in Genesis and Master Books Publishing).

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I thought the Solution half of the book was pretty good, at least as positive as the first half was negative (although the first half was largely positive (what to do) as it was negative (here's the problem). I would hope that church members (particularly parents of children and teens) and pastors (without whose leadership no motion will happen) will take the problem seriously - it isn't *just* about loosing our church kids, but an answer as to why we are so ineffective at reaching our culture - and honestly, earnestly, and prayerfully look for a solution together, even if it doesn't happen to match up entirely with what Ken Ham is recommending.

What I found so interesting about the book is how it is so much a vindication of what I have been reading and thinking lately. From a somewhat unexpected direction!

## August 3 2009: "Already Gone": Are They Coming Back?

The first two chapters of the Ken Ham book [Already Gone](#) deal with the subject of the title: how of the large number (61% to 75%, depending on who's counting) of young people who leave the church, the majority have hung up on it long before graduation - in high school, or in middle school... or even earlier. Chapter Three takes a closer look at those now-absent young people and asks, "Are you coming back?" When I talk to traditional church people about this large number (unprecedented in the history of the church) of young people who leave, most of the time I get a dismissive "they'll be back". Ham and AIG look at this question.



It turns out that about half don't come back, not even for Easter or Christmas services, and don't intend to. The other half will sometimes show up for special occasions. Furthermore, there is significant overlap with the question "Will you come back when you have children?" The 38% that said "yes" correlate strongly with those who attend special services, and the 32% that said "no" correlate strongly with those who do not attend at all. The other 30% don't know if they will be back or not. So Ham and AIG identify two groups out of these young people:

1. Those who never come to church at all and who never plan on returning
2. Those who come at Christmas and/or Easter and who plan on returning after they have children

Now comes the interesting part. Correlating these groups with their answers to other questions reveals that, with a high correlation,

1. People in Group 1 have a low level of belief in the *Bible*. The Bible is irrelevant, and church is, too.
2. People in Group 2 have a much higher level of belief in the Bible, and believe they are "saved". Instead, they have problems with the *church*.

I think this part of the survey really contributes to an understanding of the problem in the church and perhaps the culture. In his "unchristian" book, Kinnaman stopped at "unbelievers have a beef with the church". The problem is finer than that. It also lights a spark of hope that the "absent young people" situation need not be permanent, and they could be brought back if the church is willing to adopt such a strategy as Ken Ham suggests:

- The Bible must be taught and defended, with practical and relevant apologetics training suitable for all ages.
- Church members must live an authentic, biblically-based Christian life

Now, Chapter Four presents the AIG argument for how the church started its slide to

irrelevancy through compromise with Darwinism starting with his contemporary generation in England, specifically on the question of the age of the earth. Ham makes the interesting point that the majority of Americans don't believe in evolution (to the NCSE's alarm), but we have been well-conditioned to believe that the earth is billions of years old. Ham makes the argument that this compromise with "science" by church leaders and teachers (including, I note, Herschel Hobbs, who wrote much of the foundational "Baptist Faith and Message") has the following results:

- The Bible is no longer relevant to the skeptic because he/she has not been taught convincing apologetics for its historical accuracy beginning at Genesis 1:1.
- The believer has found the church to be irrelevant because of hypocrisy, a watering down of God's Word, and an unwillingness to be flexible with cultural forms in order to stay true to the principles of God's inerrant word.

(p. 84).

By "willingness to be flexible with cultural forms", I'm guessing he means staying current (music, programs, etc.) and not wallowing in nostalgia and tradition and archaic forms. I'm not so sure that's really at stake (from what I've read and observed elsewhere), but I have noticed that the people who are least interested in applying Bible principles to their lives personally are the most likely to argue with you about "Genesis can be interpreted in terms of millions of years". I think it's true: contemporary American Christians don't take the Bible *seriously* at least in part because we don't take it *literally*, at least in part because it's embarrassing to take Genesis 1-11 literally. Perhaps if we were taught apologetics - reasons to believe the Bible is true, and not simply expected to accept it blindly - and then expected to *live* in accordance with the teachings we have been taught are reliably, defensively, and literally true - then there might be less hypocrisy. Just guessing.

Now, I've looked at some critiques of "Already Gone" out there on the Net, and all the negative reviews I encountered (not very many, actually) were aimed at exactly this chapter, by people who *DO* believe that Genesis and "millions of years" are compatible. They tend to suggest that any problem the church has with retaining young people is because of those young-earthers that anyone who respects scientific truth are trying to get away from. Well... maybe. But its easy to propose a theory like that, but you need to back it up with a study of your own. Ken Ham, Answers in Genesis, and America's Research Group have produced a study indicating that it is lack of belief in the literal interpretation of the Bible that is the problem, not embarrassment at an insufficiently open-minded interpretation.

[In which case, they can game their survey to produce the sort of results that will support their theory. It is possible that the AIG/ARG survey did this, but at least they included part of their survey questions as an appendix, so you can judge for yourself. I believe that the obviously objective-neutral questions are sufficient to sustain the base statistics and Sunday School effects and "Are they coming back?" conclusions of chapters 1, 2, and 3. Furthermore, Britt Beemer, the researcher, is also the co-author,

and reflects on the potential for slanted surveys, particularly at the end of chapter 2.]

The last bit of Chapter 4 is Ken Ham's theory of evangelism in a post-Christian culture. He has another video ("Why Won't They Listen?") that I have which discusses this: Seminarians compare Peter's sermon on Pentecost, and in the Temple, which resulted in thousands of decisions, with Paul's sermon on Mars Hill, which resulted in a handful of decisions. The conclusion: Preach like Peter, not like Paul. But Peter was preaching to *Jews*, who already had a Bible background, already accepted the Creation story, and were "primed" to accept the Resurrection story. The Greeks that Paul preached to were not. Paul had to "go back to Genesis", to start from basic principles. This situation maps to the present: American culture *used to be* more "Jewish", but now it is more pagan "Greek". The Graham crusades that occurred in the last century would probably not do as well today (and they don't, judging from how well the Graham and Palau campaigns in Tucson, in which I participated, turned out). In this theory, evangelism has to *start* with Original Principles, but when the church undermines those principles with compromise with "scientific" (actually philosophical) notions about "millions of years", we are severely handicapped. Irrelevant before even starting.

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## August 1 2009: "Already Gone": Sunday School

Very interesting confluence of three streams:

1. I've read some books in the past few years, most recently by Kinnaman and Viola as influenced by Barna Group statistics and conclusions, that set forth the argument that the current church model is broken. The statistic that up to 75% of young people hang up on the church is presented in this context.
2. Personally, I've been watching my own church, Central Baptist, and the other traditional churches in my area struggling and declining. I've seen that "75%" statistic in unmistakable force right at home in Central Baptist of Tucson.
3. As a creationist, I admire Ken Ham and follow his organization, [Answers in Genesis](#). Even at the beginning it was not (as the Institute for Creation Research is - another organization I track and support) exclusively focused on young-earth creationism so much as the need of the church to take the first eleven chapters of Genesis as literal truth.



Ken Ham and Answers in Genesis have produced a new book, [Already Gone](#), in which they take a closer look at that "75%" (or 63%, or whatever the statistic is in whatever context it is stated) of young people that leave the church. What I find is particularly interesting about this book is that it is not just a rehash of Barna research. AIG contracted with Britt Beemer of America's Research Group, a professional market-oriented study organization, to do a fresh poll on exactly *that 20 to 29-year-old group who left the church*. The study also went deeper than the surface "why" answers

to beliefs and the "when" answers behind the "why" (although as a confirmation, the ARG study produced the same density of "why" questions as the Barna studies).

First off, the base statistic (the focus of Chapter One):

- 95% attended church regularly through middle school. Or, 5% left the church *before graduating from eighth grade.*
- 55% attended church regularly during high school. Or, 40% left the church *during the high school teen years.*
- 11% attended church regularly during college. Or, 44% left the church *during the time they attended college.*
- That remaining 11% left after graduating from college.

Then ARG follows that up with the question of "when did you have your first doubts that all the accounts and stories in the Bible are true":

- 39.8% said, in middle school
- 43.7% said, in high school
- 10.6% said, in college

As Ham points out, this debunks the common notion that the adversarial environment in secular universities is destroying young Christians' faith. The problem starts way back in middle school, *or earlier.*

Chapter Two looks at the prime suspect behind this crisis of youthful belief: the Sunday School at the children and youth age levels. The next question was, "Did you often attend Sunday School?" 61%, yes; 39%, no. So right off the bat, there are a lot of kids that "come to church" (attend "worship" services) with their parents, or participate in children's or youth ministry programmed events, but not Sunday School. Maybe there are churches out there who don't have Sunday School (like Central, at the moment... although we have sort of restarted children's and middle school Sunday School, mostly because some concerned people feel like we ought to have it). Maybe there were other forces at play.

But then the respondents are asked various questions on belief and morality. People who gave unbiblical answers were somewhat *more likely to have attended Sunday School* than not. Furthermore, from other questions of *what* they were taught in Sunday School, it is evident that by far the majority had conservative, faithful, literal, biblical teachers and pastors.

Based on this, Ken Ham concludes that Sunday School is actually *harmful* to young people's spiritual growth. It is certainly clear that Sunday School, as it is now practiced in traditional churches, is not helping with the attrition problem.

He then explores the options. First would be eradication - just halting the practice. He points out that Sunday School is a relatively recent invention, adapted from a British idea in 1780, so (like so many of our traditions) there isn't anything inherently

"biblical" about Sunday School. He goes on to point out that much of the time, children's and youth Sunday School is an opportunity for parents (already used to the concept from public education) to abrogate their own responsibilities. In my mind, there's actually a lot going for the "if it don't work, dump it" option. Perhaps the "Family Integrated Church" crowd would applaud the "terminate Sunday School" option. But Ham and AIG do not recommend it.

Instead, they suggest renovation. More than mere "re-decoration", in which a few insubstantial cosmetic changes are made; rather a deep-diving, everything-on-the-table, thoughtful and prayerful, radical change of the *HOW* and *WHAT* of Sunday School.

Ultimately, however, *parents* need to reassume their roles as teacher and pastor to their own children. If parents are at all concerned about the statistics presented in this book, and confirmed in so many other studies, if they fear that their own children might become statistics themselves, then *they* need to step up to the plate.

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So far, this book is an affirmation of the trend of my thoughts. And of my experiences! In all my remembrances as a child and a youth, I can't recall *any* Sunday School lesson (or sermon) that had any lasting effect. In fact, the most lasting impression I took away from high school Sunday School was how my teacher could turn his styrofoam coffee cup inside out while he was talking at us. We Ormand kids came to Sunday School because our parents were active in the church, and we just did it. I suppose we went to our regular public school classes with the same attitude. So when I started attending classes at the University of Arizona, and went to church with my aunt, and discovered that my college Sunday School teacher was a UA chemistry professor and an ardent creationist - **gave us reasons to believe that Genesis was actually true** - it was a world-rocking experience that I remember to this day.

As a youth worker and Sunday School teacher myself, I realized that the kids were just in there for the ride, or the society, or (the more surly and uncooperative ones) because they were forced to be there. The "Powers That Be" had mandated the use of Southern Baptist Convention Sunday School literature, and while I used it at first because I had always been around it myself growing up, and because the department teaching staff planned around it, eventually I came to notice how vacuous it was, and just quietly started to "roll my own". All "life application" and "hop-scotch through the Bible" (nothing systematic). I noticed how the new crop of freshmen had to use the index to find Bible books, and had no real grasp of basic Bible teachings or stories. Basically, the Children's Department handed us a batch of biblical illiterates every year. All raised on Southern Baptist Convention literature.

And lately, now that the statistics have become "public", and confirmed from multiple sources, I can look at the children and youth at Central Baptist and fully agree with *all* the points that Ham makes in his book. Especially about renovating Sunday School and the role of parents. However, I have also learned (from experience in a few churches, and by observation of several others), it takes a global, coordinated effort by the **entire**

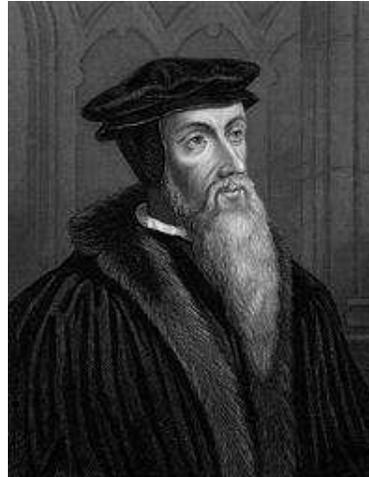
**church** to renovate even one class. One little teacher trying to do the right thing results in lack of cooperation at least, and rebukes and dismissal at worst.

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## July 24 2009: Calvin and the Reformed Worldview

The July 4 issue of World had a few articles ([\[1\]](#) and [\[2\]](#)) celebrating the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth with an overview of Calvin's contributions to the Reformation, American civilization, and the Christian worldview.

One of the articles made a point that I particularly appreciated, comparing Luther's and Calvin's contribution to the Reformation. Luther changed church doctrine. He challenged the teaching of the Roman Catholic church on salvation. He introduced a new Protestant theology. He changed the hierarchy of pope, bishop, priest. Yes, he opened the way for liberty and peace with God through faith, but he didn't really affect the way people lived.



Calvin, on the other hand, introduced a new *worldview* for believers, that would involve every part of their lives, not just the religious or "church" part, the Sunday morning part. Vocation, lifestyle, art, service to others, politics, *everything*. The article proposes that, for this distinction, Calvin has had a more enduring influence on the West than Luther did.

The thing of it all is, Luther was a priest, and continued as a priest during the Reformation. He was joined by other priests and their parishoners, and thus the Protestant denominations (particularly the Lutheran one) was formed. It was structural, not merely verbal or teaching.

Yet it would seem that most of what Calvin did was verbal or teaching. He wrote books. He delivered sermons. We have many of these, and can reconstruct his thought. But the church in Geneva, the successful, *practical* church, the people who *ACTED* on John Calvin's teachings and examples... were they motivated by his teachings? If we would like to see Christians living in response to a Christian worldview, and living Christ in every part of their lives, how can we recreate Calvin's success with leading his Geneva congregation? Is it just the teachings?

**YES, IT WAS.** If so, then given the general failure of the Western Protestant church to inspire church members to adopt a Christian worldview, in spite of many, Many, MANY sermons and Sunday School lessons and books and motivational speakers, then either Calvin's teaching methods were more effective than our day's, or the people who received the teachings in his day were of a different character than 21st Century Americans. Well, actually, that's not hard to believe, but if Christians have to own a particular character (common in the late medievell) to adopt a worldview, then the show

is already over.

**NO, IT WAS MORE THAN THAT.** Certainly Calvin lived what he taught, so he was an example as well as a source of teaching. But he would have had to enlist disciples to follow his example. Maybe I need to do more research on Calvin's methods (most of what is written about Calvin is his teachings; we apparently don't have much reliable history about *how* he did things, pastored, encouraged his church members to *ACT* on the teachings). It isn't clear that there was much more than his books and sermons.

**IT DOESN'T REALLY MATTER.** If we want to see our Western Christianity *actualized* by having people live out a Christian worldview, then we need to do whatever it takes. If just teaching and preaching isn't working, then we need to do more. I think there's hope for seeing it; if it happened once in Geneva in the mid 1500s, maybe it can happen again in America in the early 2000s. But we do need to recognize that, if we want to see it happen, and preaching isn't doing it, then we need to hang up on the traditional idea that preaching is the best and primary means to making disciples.

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[1] <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/15567>

[2] <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/15541>

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## July 23 2009: Is Christianity in Decline? (And does it matter?)



A recent issue of World (a news magazine from a Christian point of view) had a few interesting articles related to the recent polls that indicate that Americans are abandoning Christianity. One ([1]) is a review of a new book, [God is Back](#) by Micklethwait and Wooldridge, two economists who analyze the data and come to a more sanguine conclusion about Christianity's competitive edge with secularism and Islam than is usually heard. Another article ([2]) describes how Christian zeal in America ebbs and flows, and how the "Sixth Wave" may be mounting.

Together, the articles make two points that are particularly interesting to me:

- Perhaps it isn't so much that Christianity is in *decline* in the West as the population is becoming *polarized*. Traditionally, it may have been typical to identify with a cultural norm; now, maybe not so much. Atheists are becoming bolder. Nominal Christians are dropping the label. But believers are becoming more serious about Jesus. If someone self-identifies as a "Christian", it is more likely that they really *are*.
- The statistic that a large percentage of "church youth" are hanging up on church involvement is not challenged. However, a significant percentage of children of

skeptics are coming to faith in Christ.

"The sky isn't really falling" is a welcome good-news story. What sort of response do I make to these points?

## **Polarization**

I'm all for people being real. Be a real skeptic or a real believer, just don't sit on the fence. I'd say that God (in Revelation, referring to the "lukewarm" Laodiceans) would say the same. I'd say further that, unless the ascendant Left stifles the marketplace of ideas (as they are prone to do, what with the "Fairness Doctrine" and the way academics scuttle the careers of creationist colleagues), if we get to participate in a real discussion in our society, "Truth Will Out".

What does this mean for the church, however?

To the extent that the traditional structure of many churches reflects that previous age where people were content to be "nominal Christians", and wear a label that their heart wasn't really in, these churches will fade as these half-way believers hang it up. Perhaps the bigger churches will get by on the force of the pastor's charisma, or the consumer attraction of church programs. Little churches won't manage, and we are already seeing small churches that cling stubbornly to traditional forms are "greying" and shrinking and dying. It would be far better for churches to switch from "retaining the tepid" mode to "enabling the committed". Actually, of course, churches rarely switch - it's in their "DNA", and a change of direction requires a new start. I don't know if we are quite seeing this with new startups (at least in the Southern Baptist ones I'm aware of), but hopefully we'll figure it out. Maybe "postmodern churches". Maybe "house churches".

## **Swapping church kids for skeptic kids**

I've known a few kids from unsupportive families. They definitely tend to be more real, more interested, more active than kids from "church families". They are also not as numerous. The same statistics these people are looking at indicate that by far the majority of people in the U.S. are "Christian", often church members, and the skeptics are very much in the minority. So trading up to 75% of the church kids who hang up on church by the time they are 20 years old for even a significant percentage of kids from the minority skeptic population is a losing deal, number-wise. Now, trading uninterested, uninvolved kids for ones who are more serious may be trading Quantity for Quality... remains to be seen.

But there is another problem. Again, the existing structure for churches regarding young people involves the "youth ministry". I've been there (I may be there *now*) - it's pretty darn hard for a youth ministry to be *different* than the larger church. If the larger church is structured to "retain the tepid", then so will the youth ministry. To the extent that we even have this "75% attrition" statistic, the youth ministry, as currently structured, is part of the problem. And just like the larger church; if it isn't "enabling

the committed", it will loose them. If a youth ministry isn't expending intentional effort on those young people who are serious about Jesus... why should they stay? For games, and camps, and shallow application-oriented Sunday School lessons, and "Gross Nights", and getting to shave the youth pastor's head when evangelism goals are reached?

So the bottom line of my reaction to these articles that "the sky isn't really falling" is generally positive. It also doesn't change one whit my perception that **the traditional evangelical church *must change... or die.***

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[1] <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/15473>

[2] <http://www.worldmag.com/articles/15477>

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## July 18 2009: Judging Your Brothers

I subscribe to the "Linux4Christians" mailing list. It is supposed to be for Christians to discuss Linux and Open Source software without having to deal with hostility from the predominantly anti-Christian geeks in the usual fora. It seems there's not that much for Christians to talk about Linux, after covering Bible programs and church software, like projector display programs, so the discussion often devolves to theology or politics. A recent discussion thread centered on [judging others](#). I don't think anything new was added beyond the usual "judge not lest ye be judged" and "spiritual discernment" and the like, but it got to the point where some people were threatening to unsubscribe. One participant in the discussion noted that nobody was changing their position as a result of the argument - nobody's mind was being changed - nobody was being *converted* - so the argument was fruitless and pointless.



And so it seems to be with this subject of Church Structure. The argument is out there - there are plenty of books and speakers and videos and audio files about how Evangelicalism is failing, and the rise of the Postmodern or Emerging Church, and how the majority of young people from church-going families are hanging up on the church themselves. The people who are convinced of this (probably including me) do not seem to be changing their minds and rejoining the traditional church scene. The people who are not convinced - or at least, not to the point of questioning or discarding their precious church traditions - are not changing their minds and looking for a better way to do things. Each side sits in judgment on the other - although, from what I've seen, the opponents of structural change seem to lump all the "Emerging" categories into the worst heresies of the "Emergent" flavour, indiscriminantly.

It amazes me that Christian leaders even from traditional denominational backgrounds can agree that confessional Christianity seems to be shrinking in the west, but can't

quite consider the possibility of a deep-reaching restructuring of the way the church operates. It speaks to me of the power of a **worldview** in which the church is supposed to have a Sunday Morning "Worship" service with music and preaching, a Sunday School where denominational "life application" lessons are taught to all ages, and programs are conducted especially for children and youth and seniors, to attract potential members. That's just the way it is, it's supposed to be that way, and it just wouldn't be "church" if it weren't like that.

So what do you do if you recognize the defect of that worldview? You realize (undergo a *paradigm shift*) that the traditional church model isn't working, and you just can't support it anymore. *But you can't say anything about it to the other members!* They wouldn't understand, and they would probably denounce you as a troublemaker, and divisive. It doesn't do any good to advocate, or argue, or present the facts, because you aren't going to change their minds, or "convert" them.

So you merely separate from them, looking for others who share your worldview. But this act of recognizing that these people are *wrong*, trying to convince them of the error, and then separating from them, is the act of "judging". In a sense, you are condemning them to frustration and irrelevance.

Is it wrong to judge other believers this way? Well, in a sense, it is merely a new twist on denominationalism. Denominations are formed when one group becomes convinced that another group is wrong on some point of doctrine, and separate from them. What keeps Baptists and Presbyterians separate, for instance, includes perspectives on infant baptism and church government. We see a split between The Episcopal Church in North America and a new group called The Anglican Church in North America, diverging primarily on the point of Biblical authority and homosexuality. Historically, we are aware of the split between the Protestant and Roman Catholic branches of Christianity on a whole raft of issues. In all of these cases, where there is a split, one group is going to be *more right* on the issue than the other. Of course, both sides will think it is them, but only one side is actually correct.

In this matter of church structure, the issue isn't even theological, primarily, but methodological - and yet tempers flare and hot words are uttered because one side wants to do a better job of what Christ has us here to do, and the other side wants to preserve what is familiar and comfortable. If that is really the point of separation, I think we can safely say who is *more right* than the other.

So judgment is not wrong, if the point of the judgment is to serve God better. But judgment by itself does not convince the more-wrong side. People's minds are not changed by argument.

Just pray that God would convict through His Holy Spirit. Follow the paradigm where it leads. And keep your mouth shut.