I. Seven “Defeaters” That Tim Keller Identifies In His Book “The Reason For God”

1. There can’t just be one true religion. The pluralism defeater. Other ways of stating it include “All religions are different ways to the same God, to believe otherwise is to arrogant and/or naïve” and “We must tolerate everyone – intolerance is dangerous in a post 9/11 world!” Also included under this category is the belief that religious belief is too culturally conditioned to be truth for all people.

2. How could a good God allow suffering? Suffering proves there is either no God or else the God who is there is either not good or not powerful enough to do anything about suffering.

3. Christianity is a straightjacket. Why would I want to buy into something that would limit my freedom to live as I want to live? Why would I want to buy into something that is culturally rigid and requires all cultures to become like this Western European religion?

4. The church is responsible for so much injustice. Christian leaders or TV are manipulative and dishonest. And the history of the church is not a glowing record either. “Perhaps the biggest deterrent to Christianity for the average person today is not so much [the church’s history of] violence and warfare but the shadow of fanaticism. Many non-believers have friends or relatives who have become ‘born-again’ and seem to have gone off the deep end.” (Keller) You must realize that many people who have rejected Christianity in our culture have had significant exposure to Christians and to church!

5. How can a loving God send people to Hell? Keller speaks of two related defeaters under this category: “A God of judgment simply can’t exist because everyone is free to choose their own morality” and “A God of judgment can’t be a God of love.”

6. Science has disproved Christianity. This was one of the main defeaters when modernism reigned – it had died down in the age of postmodernism. But with the recent onslaught of books like Richard Dawkins’ “The God Delusion” it is back on the rise again. Beliefs under this category include the belief that miracles can’t happen and that evolution has disproved the Bible.

7. You can’t take the Bible seriously. Under this category Keller includes the beliefs that “We can’t trust the Bible as historically accurate” and “We can’t trust the Bible culturally.” “When I first came to New York almost 20 years ago, the main problem people had with the Bible [were] in the areas [of] science and history. Today things have shifted somewhat. I find more people now especially upset by what they call the outdated and regressive teaching of the Bible. It seems to support slavery and the subjugation of women. These positions appear so outrageous to contemporary people that they have trouble accepting any other parts of the Bible’s message.” (Keller)

II. Several More That Are Identified In David Kinnaman’s Book “Unchristian” In recent surveys of those outside of the Christian faith between the ages of 16 and 29, the top 3 descriptions/perceptions of what Christianity is were that it is: 1) Anti-homosexual (91% say this), 2) Judgmental (87% say this), and 3) Hypocritical (85 % say this.)

8. Christians are hypocritical and who would want to be a hypocrite? Isn’t authenticity the most important thing?

9. The imperialism defeater: “All you Christians want are converts – you have no respect for others’ views.” This is seen in the history of the church as well as in my experience with “born-againers.”

10. Christianity is anti-homosexual.

11. Christianity makes people too sheltered. It produces an “ark culture” and a bunch of brainless followers. Who wants to be part of this? (See Walter Kirn’s article from GQ Sept 2002 “What Would Jesus Do?”)

12. The church is too political – and is in bed with the Republican party.

13. Christians are judgmental. The fact is, the church is known mostly for what it is against in our culture.
III. Several More That I Believe Thrive In Our Culture:

14. Christians just want to exploit the world/creation.

15. Christians have no concern for art and beauty and the good things in this world. Christians are too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good and are always condemning stuff (or at least disregarding it) unless it’s about Jesus. See the chapter about worship at GMA as seen through the eyes of an outsider in “Body Piercing Saved My Life: Inside The Phenomenon Of Christian Rock” by Andrew Beaujon. “I’m not saved and don’t think I ever will be, but if such a miracle were to take place, I can’t imagine anything worse than being forced to pay for my salvation by listening to worship music for the rest of my days. Worship music is the logical conclusion of Christian adult contemporary music – not just unappealing but unbearable to anyone not already in the fold... Worship tunes tend to evince an adolescent theology, one that just can’t get over how darn cool it is that Jesus sacrificed himself for the world.” (Beaujon pg. 158)

16. Christians have no concern to deal with the big societal issues like poverty and racism. Christianity just seems to care about people’s internal spiritual lives but doesn’t care about the big issues of life.

17. Christianity is just a way to justify an upper-middle class bourgeois life. Who wants a safe, comfortable life?

18. It’s boring and irrelevant.

19. All truth claims are attempts to take power over someone else. The deconstructionist defeater.

20. You Christians can’t even get along with each other so why would I want to be a part of that?

IV. What Are Some Of The Ways We As A Church Can Begin To Work On These Defeaters?

• There are too many to deal with in one sermon or discussion. We must be committed to the slow, hard work of the kingdom.

• Not all of these are defeaters for every person – this it is vital to get to know people and discover what are their defeaters. This is why the great Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer said once that if he only had an hour to spend with someone to talk about Christianity, he would spend 55 minutes asking them questions and 5 minutes formulating a response. We must be quick to listen and slow to speak.

• Remember these are not just theoretical objections – but arise from a complex group of factors including people’s own story.

• When dealing with these defeaters we must be careful of giving away the farm and just trying to downplay things that are offensive to our culture. There are non-negotiables in Christianity.

• To really begin to break down the defeaters and the perception of the implausibility of Christianity among our friends and neighbors, we must deal with them in a multitude of ways.
  o It is important for them to be brought up and responded to briefly in the sermons and other times when people speak in the worship service. But this must be done quickly, preferably in 5 minutes or less, because otherwise it will seem combative and people quickly glaze over if they sense they are being given an apologetics lecture. (Ex. Comment about a sermon on the resurrection from an outsider. “I wanted to see what difference the resurrection made for our world”)
  o We must deal with them in our conversations with people and in the way we live among people in our city. Remember that people come to faith as a series of mini-decisions and the way we live is vital for breaking down people’s stereotypes about what Christianity is!
  o But it is vital that we are able to show we truly understand the defeater belief by stating it in its most persuasive form. If we create a strawman and then easily defeat it, we actually makes things worse.
  o We model what Christianity is about in everything we do. Thus all of the church’s programs, where the church decides to spend its money and energy can either break down the defeater beliefs among our neighbors or contribute to strengthening them! (Ex. The songs we sing and the things we pray for can contribute to the idea that Christians could care less about this world and are not in touch with reality or concerned about the big issues of our day – or they can serve to break down the stereotypes that exist.”
  o We can schedule specific times to bring up and deal with defeaters in more detail like in “We’ve Got Issues” events.