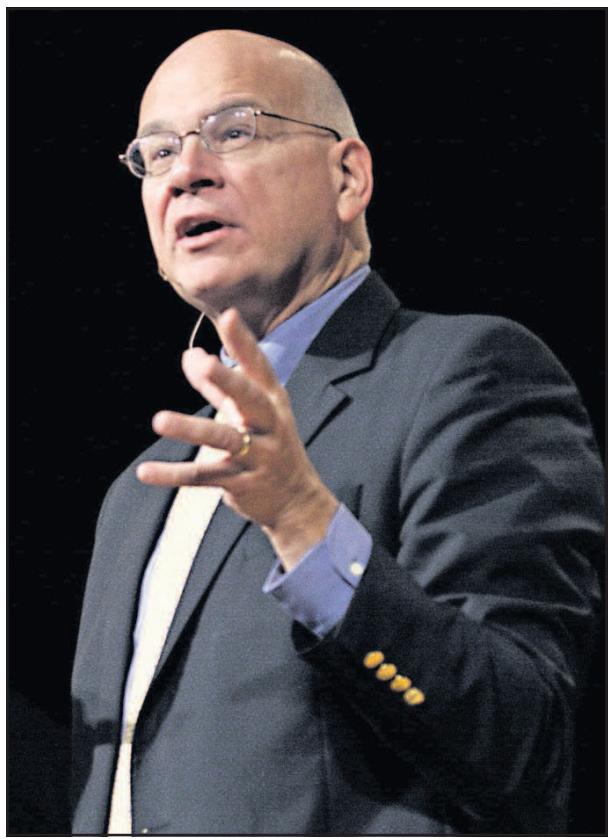


Pastor, am I a Christian?

What does it mean to be a Christian in the 21st century? Can one be a Christian and yet doubt the virgin birth or the Resurrection? I put these questions to the Rev. Timothy Keller, an evangelical Christian pastor and best-selling author who is among the most prominent evangelical thinkers today. Our conversation has been edited for space and clarity.



NICHOLAS KRISTOF
Comment



Rev. Timothy Keller is an evangelical Christian pastor and best-selling author.

Keller: If something is truly integral to a body of thought, you can't remove it without destabilizing the whole thing. A religion can't be whatever we desire it to be. If I'm a member of the board of Greenpeace and I come out and say climate change is a hoax, they will ask me to resign. I could call them narrow-minded, but they would rightly say that there have to be some boundaries for dissent or you couldn't have a cohesive, integrated organization. And they'd be right. It's the same with any religious faith.

Kristof: But the earliest accounts of Jesus' life, like the Gospel of Mark and Paul's letter to the Galatians, don't even mention the virgin birth. And the reference in Luke to the virgin birth was written in a different kind of Greek and was probably added later. So isn't there room for skepticism?

Keller: If it were simply a legend that could be dismissed, it would damage the fabric of the Christian message. Luc Ferry, looking at the Gospel of John's account of Jesus' birth into the world, said this taught that the power behind the whole universe was not just an impersonal cosmic principle but a real person who could be known and loved. That scandalized Greek and Roman philosophers, but was revolutionary in the history of human thought. It led to a new emphasis on the importance of the individual person and on love as the supreme virtue because Jesus was not just a great human being, but the pre-existing Creator God, miraculously come to earth as a human being.

Kristof: And the Resurrection? Must it really be taken literally?

Keller: Jesus' teaching was not the main point of his mission. He came to save people through his death for sin and his resurrection. So his important ethical teaching only makes sense when you don't separate it from these historic doctrines. If the Resurrection is a genuine reality, it explains why Jesus can say that the poor and the meek will "inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). St. Paul said without a real resurrection, Christianity is useless (1 Corinthians 15:19).

Kristof: But let me push back. As you know better than I, the Scriptures themselves indicate that the Resurrection wasn't so clear cut. Mary Magdalene didn't initially recognize the risen Jesus, nor did some disciples, and the gospels are fuzzy about Jesus' literal presence — especially Mark, the first gospel to be written. So if you take these passages as meaning that Jesus literally rose from the dead, why the fuzziness?

Keller: I wouldn't characterize the New Testament descriptions of the risen Jesus as fuzzy. They are very concrete in their details. Yes, Mary doesn't recognize Jesus at first, but then she does. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24) also don't recognize Jesus at first. Their experience was analogous to meeting someone you last saw as a child 20 years ago. Many historians have argued that this has the ring of eyewitness authenticity. If you were making up a story about the Resurrection, would you have imagined that Jesus was altered enough to not be identified immediately but not so much that he couldn't be recognized after a few moments? As for Mark's gospel, yes, it ends very abruptly without getting to the Resurrection, but most scholars believe that the last part of the book or scroll was lost to us.

Skeptics should consider another surprising aspect of these accounts. Mary Magdalene is named as the first eyewitness of the risen Christ, and other women are mentioned as the earliest eyewitnesses in the other gospels, too. This was a time in which the testimony of women was not admissible evidence in courts because of their low social status. The early pagan critics of Christianity latched on to this and dismissed the Resurrection as the word of "hysterical females." If the gospel writers were inventing these narratives, they would never have put women in them. So they didn't invent them.

The Christian Church is pretty much inexplicable if we don't believe in a physical resurrection. N.T. Wright has argued in "The Resurrection of the Son of God" that it is difficult to come up with any historically plausible alternate explanation for the birth of the Christian movement. It is hard to account for thousands of Jews virtually overnight worshipping a human being as divine when everything about their religion and culture conditioned them to believe that was not only impossible, but deeply heretical. The best explanation for the change was that many hundreds of them had actually seen Jesus with their own eyes.

Kristof: So where does that leave people like me? Am I a Christian? A Jesus follower? A secular Christian? Can I be a Christian while doubting the Resurrection?

Keller: I wouldn't draw any conclusion about an individual without talking to him or her at length. But, in general, if you don't accept the Resurrection or other foundational beliefs as defined by the Apostles' Creed, I'd say you are on the outside of

the boundary.
Kristof: Can I ask: Do you ever have doubts? Do most people of faith struggle at times over these kinds of questions?

Keller: Yes and yes. In the Bible, the Book of Jude (Chapter 1, verse 22) tells Christians to "be merciful to those who doubt." We should not encourage people to simply stifle all doubts. Doubts force us to think things out and re-examine our reasons, and that can, in the end, lead to stronger faith.

I'd also encourage doubters of religious teachings to doubt the faith assumptions that often drive their skepticism. While Christians should be open to questioning their faith assumptions, I would hope that secular skeptics would also question their own. Neither statement — "There is no supernatural reality beyond this world" and "There is a transcendent reality beyond this material world" — can be proven empirically, nor is either self-evident to most people. So they both entail faith. Secular people should be as open to questions and doubts about their positions as religious people.

Kristof: What I admire most about Christianity is the amazing good work it inspires people to do around the world. But I'm troubled by the evangelical notion that people go to heaven only if they have a direct relationship with Jesus. Doesn't that imply that billions of people — Buddhists, Jews, Muslims, Hindus — are consigned to hell because they grew up in non-Christian families around the world? That Gandhi is in hell?

Keller: The Bible makes categorical statements that you can't be saved except through faith in Jesus (John 14:6; Acts 4:11-12). I'm very sympathetic to your concerns, however, because this seems so exclusive and unfair. There are many views of this issue, so my thoughts on this cannot be considered the Christian response. But here they are:

You imply that really good people (e.g., Gandhi) should also be saved, not just Christians. The problem is that Christians do not believe anyone can be saved by being good. If you don't come to God through faith in what Christ has done, you would be approaching on the basis of your own goodness. This would, ironically, actually be more exclusive and unfair, since so often those that we tend to think of as "bad" — the abusers, the haters, the feckless and selfish — have themselves often had abusive and brutal backgrounds.

Christians believe that it is those who admit their weakness and need for a savior who get salvation. If access to God is through the grace of Jesus, then anyone can receive eternal life instantly. This is why "born again" Christianity will always give hope and spread among the "wretched of the earth."

I can imagine someone saying, "Well, why can't God just accept everyone — universal salvation?" Then you create a different problem with fairness. It means God wouldn't really care about injustice and evil.

There is still the question of fairness regarding people who have grown up away from any real exposure to Christianity. The Bible is clear about two things — that salvation must be through grace and faith in Christ, and that God is always fair and just in all his dealings. What it doesn't directly tell us is exactly how both of those things can be true together. I don't think it is insurmountable. Just because I can't see a way doesn't prove there cannot be any such way. If we have a God big enough to deserve being called God, then we have a God big enough to reconcile both justice and love.

LIMEY PASTOR

Shekinah, the covering of God

I want to share with you two unusual experiences in my adventure with God. Paul, the apostle, talked about the importance of having faith in things unseen. This is indeed true. But, it seems a common belief that there is no evidence of God's presence — and the only evidence is the record of other people's experience in the Bible and elsewhere — which of course breeds a certain skepticism due to the antiquity of most of these events. This is definitely not true.

The experiences I am going to recount were witnessed by many, many people including me. In 2006, as part of my seminary education, I traveled to Israel with a party of many pastors and pastoral students. My teachers were professor Barbara Rossing, a teacher of the New Testament, and professor Esther Menn who taught the Old Testament. One Friday evening with the full moon above us we gathered at the ruins of the Jerusalem Temple, at the Wailing Wall. There were thousands of worshippers gathered. A curtain was hung to separate the men from women. Professor Rossing's cousin, who was in charge of the ritual arrangements for the different faith traditions in Jerusalem,



COLIN BROWN
Comment

was there. As was his friend, a Cabalist (a mystic) from New York.

It was a Friday night, a Sabbath night, of the full moon. A rare event. We all began to do our prayers in Hebrew, a pulsing force, with a lot of repetition. We would chant for some minutes then there would be a pause and a pregnant expectation. Then there would be a continuation of this cycle. We did this for at least

twenty to thirty times. All of a sudden we paused, and a massive hush filled the air. A colossal something began to fall, palpable to the skin, like a transparent feather as big as the temple itself. It felt like a rain of feathers and fingers that passed through our bodies, reading every cell and pore, bringing astonishing peace. It was a slow exploration of our innermost beings, full of love and astonishing spiritual healing. After it had made its contact with us, we stood in the hush, and then for a while picked up our worshipful chanting.

Afterwards I asked the Cabalist from New York, "What was that?"

"That was the Shekinah, the Covering of God," he said.

Several years after, I was taking a group to Holden Village, a retreat center on Lake Chelan in Washington State as

part of my internship service at Creator Lutheran Church, and we attended a Saturday night healing service in the chapel. A sand-filled cross was in the center of the room and a gathered group of people and children were the congregation. People who felt the need for prayers for themselves or others would take a candle, light it and plant it in the sand of the cross. Some of us would weep as we did this. Music played, hymns were sung. I also went forward to drop to my knees and pray, and light my candle. I also wept.

Out of the surrounding people, small children felt impelled to come up and touch each one of us on our shoulders as we prayed. We felt tears of cleansing flowing freely. Jesus lived, in the heart of the cross.

All of a sudden the same descending presence I knew from Israel came down and rained through us like a blissful, loving breeze. This was also a shared experience.

Afterwards one of my teen leaders asked me: "What was that?"

I was able to say: "That was the Shekinah, the Covering of God."

Colin Brown is pastor of Boardman's Good Shepherd Lutheran Church on Locust Road. Service is at 11 a.m. Sunday.

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