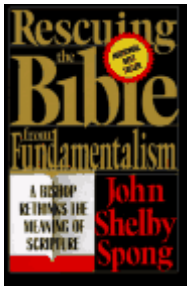
Rescuing the Gospel from Bishop Spong

Who is Bishop Spong?

Retired Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong is a man with a mission. He is out to save Christianity from the fundamentalists. He argues that while liberal, mainline churches have abandoned the Bible, which he claims to love, fundamentalists have made an idol of it. Fortunately, Bishop Spong has discovered the real meaning of the Bible, and not surprisingly, it ends up sounding more like Sigmund Freud than anything remotely familiar to historical Christianity.

	Spong reveals to us the real message of the Bible in his best selling book, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*. For those who are curious about how a thoroughly postmodern bishop might view the Bible, this is a fascinating read. Bishop Spong's depiction of Christianity also gives us insight into the kind of theology that motivates gay rights activists, radical feminists, and Marxists to use the Bible in support of their various movements. For, according to Bishop Spong, the gospel of Christ is found in three words: love, life, and being. This gospel can be reduced to the idea that tolerance is the only absolute because humanity itself is divine, without need of redemption, or even much instruction.

Bishop Spong makes it quite clear that the words of the Bible are not the words of God.{1} The bulk of Spong's book attempts to separate the Bible from any notion of truth, except where the Bishop finds a saying or thought helpful to his gospel of tolerance. Although the Bible is not propositional truth, the Bishop claims to possess truth on many subjects, things that

are true for all people everywhere. While denying truth and special revelation, he claims to have found universal truth in the Bible just the same. How does he accomplish this? By reading behind, between, and underneath the words. Only this way, he claims, can one discover what the writers really meant and what truth is relevant for all humanity.

Even though the Bible is unscientific and locked into the culture of the tribal primitives who wrote it, Spong is sure that the real truth of the Bible is that Christ called us to "be all that one can be."{2} Spong is very dogmatic about his view of truth. And his view is very popular today. It is a gospel that tells us to be spiritual without "religion." In other words, we are free to pick and choose spiritual ideas from a smorgasbord of "religious" sources.

Bishop Spong has every right to believe as he sees fit. What is irritating is that he insists he is saving Christianity from itself. He also insists that we accept his myth-making to be universally true, replacing what Christianity has taught as revealed truth for two thousand years. In this article we will consider some of the ideas that Bishop Spong would have us accept as a new gospel, the gospel according to Bishop Spong.

Bishop Spong's View of Scripture

We will begin by considering Bishop Spong's view of revelation and the Bible. Spong rejects the notion that God supernaturally used the Bible to reveal information about Himself, the human condition, or our need for salvation. In fact, Spong doubts that any objective information can be found in the Bible. Being a good postmodernist, he argues that there is "no such thing as 'objective history'."{3} The only thing that the ancient world can possibly communicate with us is a pre-scientific, narrow, limited view of reality shaped by national and tribal interests. He argues that the Bible is just as vulnerable to these limitations as any other book, maybe more so.

Spong sees Scripture as totally locked into the culture and lives of the authors. He says, “The Bible becomes not a literal road map to reality, but a historic narrative of the journey our religious forebears made in the eternal human quest to understand life, the world, themselves, and God.”{4} In fact, God is wrapped up in culture as well since Spong believes that “We have come to the dawning realization that God might not be separate from us but rather deep within us.”{5} He adds that “We look for and find meaning and divinity, not always so much in an external God as in the very depths of our humanity. . . .”{6}

The Bible then is only a book of religious experiences, not special revelation from God. However, even at this level it is a highly flawed work. A majority of the two hundred and forty-nine pages of Spong’s “rescuing” focuses on discrediting the authorship, the internal consistency, and the transmission of the biblical text. What is truly remarkable is that in the end, Spong claims to love the Bible, and decries the lack of biblical knowledge in our churches.

One response to Bishop Spong might be, “Why bother?” If the Bible is such a flawed product, hopelessly biased by its authors, filled with mistakes and inconsistencies, why be surprised or care that people no longer know what’s in it?

Fortunately, Spong admits that his attack on the Scriptures contains nothing new. Most of it is the result of 19th century Enlightenment scholarship and rooted in the anti-supernaturalism of that age, in which miracles, prophecy, and virtually any form of God’s supernatural interaction or intervention in the world was denied. What Spong is attempting to do is come up with a new Christianity loosely tied to the ancient text that founded orthodox belief. He has the right to do so, but this new gospel is not the good news given to us through the prophets and apostles by the God of the Bible.

A Sex Driven Gospel

Bishop Spong readily admits that one of the major factors that shapes his view of Scripture is its teaching on human sexuality. He begins his book with a preamble titled "Sex Drove Me to the Bible." Spong finds that the Bible's attitude on sex and gender is embarrassingly out of step with the times. What it says about everything from premarital living arrangements to homosexuality, according to Spong, is narrow-minded, misogynic, homophobic, and worst of all, pre-scientific. In contrast, Spong argues that God wants us to experience love, life, and to be all that we can be, to really be ourselves. Since he denies any notion of original sin, whatever we desire becomes a good thing as long as it allows everybody to do their thing.{7} Although he admits that the Bible is full of statements about sexual virtue, including prohibitions against premarital sex, adultery, and homosexuality, the authors of the Bible were hopelessly uninformed, lacking the benefits of modern research. One author in particular, the Apostle Paul, may have been driven by an inner struggle with his sexual identity.

According to Spong, Paul was a guilt-ridden homosexual. He claims that Paul's pre-conversion hostility towards Christians came from religious fundamentalism and self-loathing. These are the same emotions that cause modern Christians to be so angry about sexual sin today. However, salvation in Christ supposedly brought Paul peace with who he was and thus he was empowered to share this new gospel of freedom with the world. How does Bishop Spong know all this? He doesn't get it from reading the biblical text. As Spong bravely declares, "If a religious system requires that a literal Bible be embraced, I must walk away from that system."{8} Spong writes, "So enter with me into the realm of speculation as we probe the life of Paul, using his words not as literal objects but as doorways into his psyche, where alone truth that changes life can be processed." In other words, we are to ignore what Paul

actually wrote and accept what the Bishop speculates.

This speculation has gotten the Bishop into trouble with his own church. Recently, Episcopalian bishops from Africa and Asia rejected Spong's liberal views on human sexuality at a conference in England. His response was to charge that "They've moved out of animism into a very superstitious kind of Christianity. They've yet to face the intellectual revolution of Copernicus and Einstein that we've had to face in the developing world."{9} When the bishops voiced their objections, Spong responded by declaring "I'm not going to cease being a twentieth-century person for fear of offending somebody in the Third World. . . ." Spong's reply doesn't seem very Christ-like to those who question his speculations and mythmaking.

Who Is Jesus?

Let's turn our focus to Spong's view of the person of Jesus Christ.

Bishop Spong denies virtually everything about Jesus that orthodox Christianity has believed for the last two millennia. The virgin birth, the deity of Christ, the atoning death on the cross, the resurrection, the miracles, everything that would verify the biblical claims of Christ's authority and uniqueness are discounted, and yet Spong refers to Jesus as Lord and God's only Son. How can this be? Spong argues that "the essence of Christ was confused with the form in which that essence was communicated."{10} All the biblical writers got it wrong. The first century mentality that they brought to the subject became universalized in the text of the Bible and eventually entered into the creeds of Christianity. According to Spong, Mark would never have understood or accepted the idea of an incarnation and Paul "quite obviously was not a trinitarian."{11} Christ is "the hero of a thousand faces" and "many things to many people."{12} "All of them are Christ and none of them is Christ."{13} He adds that, "A Christianity

that is not changing is a Christianity that is dying."{14} What sense are we to make of all this?

Not surprisingly, Spong tells us that to get beyond these words and images we must use our imagination. The worldview that thinks in natural and supernatural categories must pass away. Spongs finds the answer in the project of Rudolf Bultmann, a theologian who attempted to demythologize Christianity in order to get to its core. However, Spong adds a twist. He calls us to demythologize Christianity so that we can create new myths that work for believers today. Unfortunately, our re-mythologizing of the Christ event will not last long either; every generation has to come up with new myths.

But what is the essence of Christianity for Spong? It is remarkably predictable. He writes, ". . . Jesus means love-divine, penetrating, opening, life-giving, ecstatic love. Such love is the very essence of what we mean by God. God is love. Jesus is love. God was in Christ."{15} This is why he feels that the church should reject the ideas of original sin, God's wrath, and the atoning sacrifice of Christ. It should also be broken of its prejudices, particularly towards those who commit sexual sins. Spong appropriately calls this a "terrifying, barrier- free love."{16}

The problem with all this is that the Bible, the primary record we have of Jesus' life and teachings bears nothing similar to Spong's views. It seems that he would be much better off being a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi who believed that God is Supreme Good and that our goal in life is "self-realization."{17}

Christianity and Universalism

Bishop John Spong advocates a form of Christianity often called universalism. It teaches that everyone will experience salvation of some sort and that what you believe is

irrelevant. All that really matters is that one act morally. In Bishop Spong's view, acting morally is tied to an all-inclusive, totally tolerant Christianity that rejects the notion of sin and atonement. He strips Christianity of its historical tenets fearing that all the details will alienate the modern mind. So how do modern minds respond to Spong's gospel?

Outspoken atheist Robert Price notes that although Spong classifies the biblical material as legend, he still thinks that Jesus must be something like the person the Gospels make of him.{18} Price charges that in creating his Jesus, Spong uses only biblical passages that fit his theological agenda. He adds that fundamentalist apologists have at least equal justification for their view of what Jesus said and did. Referring to Spong's gospel, Price observes that "for Christianity to change on such a scale, and for it to die, are one and the same thing."{19} It would seem that if Spong is trying to save Christianity for the modern, scientific, rational mind, he has failed. At least in the case of Professor Price.

Again we ask, how does Bishop Spong know what he claims to know. How does he know that God is a form of super-tolerant love with few moral expectations for humanity? How does he know that all religions lead to this one God? He seems to recognize that when special revelation is rejected, all that is left is culturally based knowledge. Why assume then that God is love? Perhaps the Islamic view of God, represented by a stern, legalistic religious system is a more accurate view of reality. Or maybe the warlike gods of Norse mythology best portray the spiritual domain. How does he know which view is really true?

Much of Bishop Spong's argument against orthodox Christianity consists of Bible difficulties and the notion that if we are modern we must reject the idea of special revelation. Mr. Spong lumps all types of conservative Christians together into

one straw man, one who happens to believe in a flat earth located at the center of the universe. He seems to be unaware that there are evangelicals who are astrophysicists, philosophers, or for that matter, even college educated. He has adopted the liberal views about Jesus from the Jesus Seminar and has failed to deal with the Christology of modern, conservative scholars.

What strikes me most about Bishop Spong is his arrogance. He belittles those who disagree with him and questions their sincerity, attributing orthodox views of morality to "irrational religious anger."{20} Unfortunately, Bishop Spong's rational Christianity would leave us with no Christianity at all.

Notes

1. John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible From Fundamentalism* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFranscisco, 1992), 249.
2. Ibid., 242.
3. Ibid., 37.
4. Ibid., 33.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., 236.
8. Ibid., 107.
9. www.thecrimson.harvard.edu/opinion/article.asp?ref=6329
10. Spong, 228.
11. Ibid., 229.
12. Ibid., 230.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 239.
16. Ibid., 238.
17. Bruce Demarest, *Satisfy Your Soul* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1999), 69.
18. Price, Robert, "The Afterlife of Christianity," *Free Inquiry*, Winter 1999/00, 31. Mr. Price is the Professor of

Biblical Criticism at the Center for Inquiry Institute, part of the Council for Secular Humanism.
19. Ibid.
20. Spong, 4.

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See Also *Probe Answers Our Email*:

“Bishop Spong is a Hero!”