

# Time for churches to grow up, says pot-stirring Bishop Spong

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Bishop John Shelby Spong talks more about science than he does about God and uses every opportunity to challenge the assumptions of modern Christian theology.

The church tells its practitioners that they are "miserable sinners" and "born in sin," he says. Parents who pass that message along to their children every day will not raise healthy adults, he told an audience of about 300 in Madison Thursday evening during a convention of Progressive Wisconsin United Methodists at the Madison Marriott West.

"Why people keep coming to church to be insulted and have their humanity denigrated is beyond my knowledge," he said. Spong, 69, recently retired from the Episcopal Archdiocese of Newark, N.J., after 24 years as one of the church's most controversial and outspoken leaders. He is a forceful champion of gay rights and women's rights and a critic of racial inequality.

The author of 18 books, Spong has spent the last year as a lecturer at Harvard University.

Spong, who wears a collar and refers to himself as "Jack," began his Madison speech with two statements that he said are often in conflict with each other: "I am Christian" and "I live in the 21st century."

Those on the progressive side of Christianity need to keep the two concepts closely connected, he said.

The church prefers to keep its followers docile and childlike and is afraid of "mature people who ask mature questions," said Spong, who talked more about Jewish scientists like Carl Sagan, Albert Einstein and Sigmund Freud than about Christian figures.

The Bible couldn't stand up to the early scientists - Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo - whose discoveries of the universe were at odds with the dogmas of Christianity, he said.

"The revolution that Copernicus started and Galileo brought to full extension destroyed God's location just beyond the sky and destabilized the way we think of God," he said.

Then along came Isaac Newton and his discovery of gravity, which "squeezed the world of miracle and magic." Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories challenged the Bible's literal accuracy and were denounced by Christian leaders, he said.

"Darwin forced us to live in a world that is radically different from the pre-Darwin world," said Spong.

Historically, people have quoted the Bible to defend many unfair practices, said Spong. It has been used against Darwin and in favor of slavery. It has also been

used to keep women in second-class positions of leadership, especially in the church, he said.

Spong talks up his own daughters to prove his point. One is a corporate senior vice president, another is a lawyer and law school professor. A third has a Ph.D. in physics and works for a high-tech company, and a fourth is a captain and helicopter pilot in the U.S. Marine Corps.

"You speak to my four daughters," he said.

Spong also mocked how some Christians quote Leviticus to prove the Bible's prohibition of homosexuality.

"If you are going to literalize it you better be careful," he said.

Growing up in North Carolina, he said he was taught that gays were either "morally depraved or mentally sick." But the scientific community proved that sexual orientation is not chosen, it is "awakened to," he said.

Who would choose a life of rejection? Spong asked.

No one likes to be fired from a job, driven from their family or beat up and murdered like Matthew Shepard, he said, referring to the gay college student in Laramie, Wyo., who was killed in 1998.

Human beings were never created good. "We were created simple," he said.

Afterward, Rev. Wesley White of La Crosse said that Spong's message crosses cultural and religious boundaries.

"He is bold enough to say publicly what many say privately," said White.

The Rev. Amy DeLong, who helped organize the conference, which continues today, said there is often a disconnect between the church and various disenfranchised groups.

She and others in the Methodist church are working to make it more inclusive. Representatives from other denominations who are attending the conference are interested in the same goals.

"It is a call to the church to be radically and lavishly loving," she said.

[\*The Capital Times\*](#)

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