

Christ Beyond Incarnation at Kairos CoMotion

John Shelby Spong

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MADISON, WI - "The only difference between Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Roman Catholics, and United Methodists is which country you got filtered through," said John Shelby Spong, retired Episcopal Bishop, as he spoke for a second time to more than 300 participants in a Kairos CoMotion event. Spong went on to speak about a larger key difference which divides the life of the church, that of speaking of Christ in 1st century terms of reference or 21st century images and understandings.

Noting that "the experience of God" is different from "the explanation of that experience," Spong detailed how the "God-is-in-Christ!" experience has been differently explained by having that exclamation explained by the resurrection (Paul), Jesus' baptism (Mark), Jesus' birth (Matthew and Luke), or the beginning of creation (John).

According to Spong, these explanations reflect the understanding that creation started perfectly but was ruined by human beings. This brought death, and humans needed to be returned to some form of static perfection. Spong went on to list God's failed attempts to redeem humankind - the Flood didn't work, the Law didn't work, Prophets didn't work, and Liturgy didn't work.

In summary, Spong stated, "The 1st century people interpreted Jesus against their understanding of human life as fallen. They saw Jesus as God's redemptive attempt to rescue the fallen creation and to restore them to what God had intended them to be."

Spong understands that Darwin's thinking about evolution has changed the way we look at Jesus because we now start from a different assessment of the origins of human life. Rather than a 1st century perspective of a fallen perfect creation, the 21st century sees creation starting simple, becoming more complex and self-conscious, an incomplete creation. Spong says we "no longer need to be rescued from a fall that never happened, nor restored to a perfection that was never possessed." He went on to state, "We are not fallen, we are not yet human."

"So," Spong asks, "can we tell the Jesus story against the background of a radically self-centered, survival-oriented, fear-laden creature who is not yet fully human, who does not need to be rescued from a fall, but who needs to be empowered to step beyond a survival mentality into a new humanity?"

Spong noted that in the past we have wrapped ourselves in tribal identities as a way to protect ourselves from the anxieties of life and projected our prejudices on others. This happens when people begin to think their religious tribe is better than another. Spong characterized this as, "We are God's people and anybody who doesn't look like me or act like me or worship like me cannot be part of God's people. So we felt very secure. God was our servant.... to give us a better chance at survival."

Jesus also lived in a tribal culture which drew distinctions between Jews and everybody else, the Gentiles. Paul understood Jesus to be saying something amazingly different than continuing in tribal living when in Galatians he writes, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek." Spong says, "There is something about the experience of this Christ that is so powerful that it lifts me out of my tribal identity and causes me to embrace a whole different understanding of humanity. It makes me more fully human. That's a powerful witness."

Spong went on to note this same message in the Gospels with Mark having a Roman Centurion give the interpretive message at the death of Jesus that Jesus was the "Son of God." Matthew moves this to the beginning with a star which does not just shine on the land of the Jews and draws the Gentile Wisemen to Jesus' birth. In Acts, Luke moves beyond tribalism by having the meaning of Jesus, which became visible in Jerusalem, be transported to Rome, the capital of the Gentile world. John has Jesus discuss liturgy and theology with a Samaritan woman at a well. This crossed the boundary of several prejudices and she becomes the first disciple to those beyond the Jewish tribal identity.

"Jesus is drawing people beyond the security boundary of tribal identity into a new humanity."

The same process can be found with how women are kept in second place to men. In Christ there is also no distinction between male and female. Spong outlined the shift of appreciation for Mary Magdalene, who has such a prominent part in the Jesus story but today is commonly identified first as a prostitute rather than a leader of the women disciples.

Spong went on to note other divisions, such as religious tribes, and other prejudices, such as sexual orientation. In

each instance, Spong says, "Jesus is a boundary breaker empowering us to step into a new humanity; not a sacrifice to pay the price of the sin of our fall, but an experience of God touching us so deeply that we can lay aside the boundaries of our fears and step into the next stage of human development."

Spong has a mantra or creed which motivates his doing and thinking. Along with Billy Graham, the Pope or the Ayatollah, Spong affirms he cannot tell us what or who God is. But we can tell how we have experienced God and Spong says this condenses his experience: "I experience God as the source of life.... The more fully I live, the more I make God visible. I experience God as the source of love.... The only way I can worship God is by loving wastefully. I experience God as the 'ground of all being.'... The only way I can worship God is by having the courage to be everything that I am capable of being."

Instead of conversion methodologies from one tribe or division to another, Spong advocates "following Jesus in such a way that I can build a world where every human being has a better opportunity to live more fully and thus make God visible, to love more wastefully and thus to make God visible, and to be all that person can be in the infinite variety of that person's humanity, of every race, of each gender, of every sexual orientation." Spong says this path of giving life to people, following Jesus to live for the least of our sisters and brothers that they might have life with all abundance, "will lead to a great reformation in the church."