

# Response to Good News Editorial

The Good News magazine has a long history of defending against every possible straying from a Constantinian and Creedal approach to Christianity, Their positive statement of that assessment is, "We are committed to being a voice for repentance, an agent for reform, and a catalyst for renewal within our denomination." We experience Good News to divisively target particular Bishops and Boards they consider contrary to the political agenda of the religious right.

In this same April 2002 issue they also publish the IRD article we have already shown to be more propagandistic than reportorial. Click [here](#) for the IRD accusation and our affirmation. This is evidence of an interconnected and self-referencing press consortium that attempts to seem larger and more mainstream than they are.

## Accusation

### [John Spong and the deconstruction of Christianity](#)

by James V. Heidinger II

"The Christian church doesn't really believe what it claims to believe," said the smiling Muslim evangelist to a bewildered Nigerian Christian. "One of their bishops even admits so! Here's a book that proves it. It's called The Resurrection: Myth or Reality? by someone named Spong. He's a Christian bishop."

Thus begins the book Can A Bishop Be Wrong?, a volume in which ten Episcopalian theologians (including two bishops) unite to say they believe Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong "has essentially placed himself outside the Christian tradition and is using his privileged position as a bishop to attack it."

Why is this important for us United Methodists? Because John Spong has been traveling the United Methodist circuit in recent months, speaking and being applauded as something of a celebrity.

During the recent Palm Sunday weekend, Spong gave four addresses at the Dilworth United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina. On Friday evening, some 500 persons paid \$15 each to hear his revisionisms. At the conclusion, the winsome and articulate bishop received a standing ovation.

## Affirmation

It is always difficult to deal with either/or issues in a world that lives on a continuum. This beginning quote suggests that Christianity will lose to Islam if Christianity is not a solid block of uniform believers.

Can a Bishop be wrong? - yes.  
Can an Editor be wrong? - yes.  
Can 10 Theologians be wrong? - yes.  
Can Kairos CoMotion be wrong? - yes.

There is a very crucial distinction that is not made here. Bishop Spong does not place himself outside Christianity but does what he can to expand it into the 21st Century. You can read more in our [reports](#).

For those whose identity and power are dependent upon keeping a tradition going in a setting beyond that from which it grew, this could feel like an "attack." It is in that "feeling attacked" mode that Good News attacks Bishop Spong and anyone who would question their basic presumptions.

Note the way in which "celebrity" is used. The issue is shifted away from Bishop Spong's listeners appreciating his content to any positive response to him being only a response to some celebrity status. We affirm that our applause of Bishop Spong is a response to what he says, not how well known he is.

We suspect that this number of people were not coming to hear "revisionisms" but, like the Kairos CoMotion participants, to hear hope for the present and the future. The Good News report is not based on a poll of the attendees but on a continuation of the accusation that this Bishop is wrong.

A month earlier, Spong was a featured speaker along with United Methodist Bishops Judy Craig (retired) and Sharon Zimmerman Rader (Wisconsin Area), at the "Kairos CoMotion" Conference in Madison, Wisconsin (see story on p. 32). Several years ago, Spong gave five lectures to pastors at McKendree College in southern Illinois on the theme of the "Resurrection," in which he does not believe.

Now, I can hear some of you saying, "Jim, we live in a multicultural, diverse world. Let's cut the bishop some slack here?"

But the late Canon Michael Green asked an important question in *The Truth of God Incarnate* years ago: "How much can you remove from a car, and still possess what is properly called a car?" He says lights may be a luxury and brakes may be dispensed with, but if you remove the engine or chassis, are you still talking about a car at all?

It seems that John Spong has completely dismantled the Christian car, doctrinally. Read just a few of his 12 Theses, which he posted on his Diocese of Newark web site:

- Theism, as a way of defining God, is dead. So most theological God-talk is today meaningless. A new way to speak of God must be found.
- Since God can no longer be conceived in theistic terms, it becomes nonsensical to seek to understand Jesus as the incarnation of the theistic deity. So the Christology of the ages is bankrupt.
- The virgin birth, understood as literal biology, makes Christ's Divinity, as traditionally understood, impossible.
- The miracle stories of the New Testament can no longer be interpreted as supernatural events performed by an incarnate deity.
- The view of the cross as the sacrifice for the sins of the world is a barbarian idea based on primitive concepts of God and must be dismissed. [So much for glorying in the Cross of Christ.]

Again note the discounting of what was said by placing an emphasis upon those celebrity status categories of "winsome" and "articulate."

Kairos CoMotion was pleased and proud to have these speakers and many more. The report referenced on their page 32 is a misrepresentation of the Kairos CoMotion event. You can read about that [here](#).

"Resurrection is an action of God. Jesus was raised into the meaning of God. It therefore cannot be a physical resuscitation occurring inside human history." This is [Spong's Thesis 7](#) which he invites the church to talk about. At most one can say Spong and Good News have two different explanations of resurrection, not that one believes and the other does not.

A most interesting moment of good-old-boy informal lingo to disparage issues of diversity. We prefer to honor the Holy Spirit for distributing different gifts. Spong needs no "slack" cut for pointing out out-dated theological perspectives.

You may have seen decals on cars of a young boy urinating on a different brand of car. That is the import of this sort of distinction. Is a Corvette 5.7 Liter LS1 V8 engine with Sequential Fuel Injection a real engine while a Corolla 1.8-liter DOHC 16-valve VVT-i 4-cylinder is not? Is my emphasis on a particular creed or spiritual discipline real Christianity or is yours?

Having just quoted "Canon" Michael Green and now choosing to refer to "John Spong" informally without his honorific of Bishop, this editorial sets up a subliminal reversal of episcopal authority.

The selected theses quoted grow out of this [context](#): "My sense is that history has come to a point where only one thing will save this venerable faith tradition at this critical time in Christian history, and that is a new Reformation far more radical than Christianity has ever before known and that this Reformation must deal with the very substance of that faith. This Reformation will recognize that the pre-modern concepts in which Christianity has traditionally been carried will never again speak to the post-modern world we now inhabit. This Reformation will be about the very life and death of Christianity. Because it goes to the heart of how Christianity is to be understood, it will dwarf in intensity the Reformation of the 16th century. It will not be concerned about authority, ecclesiastical polity, valid ordinations and valid sacraments. It will be rather a Reformation that will examine the very nature of the Christian faith itself. It will ask whether or not this ancient religious system can be refocused and re-articulated so as to

continue living in this increasingly non-religious world."

The "orbit" presentation here misses the setting of contrast between a 1st Century 3-story universe and a 21st Century astrophysics universe with the attendant question of how we can now speak about Jesus' presence with GOD.

There are currently [310 Episcopal Bishops](#) and there are many other issues which divide that body in more equal numbers. This also raises the question about whether faith is based on number of votes or not. We affirm faith as being beyond majorities.

The issue of "classic Christian doctrine" is tricky. The term "classic" seems to depend on who is using it. The never-ending history of creeds of varying emphases in varying circumstances points to the difficulty of definition.

What we affirm as our faith tradition in contemporary language, Good News dismisses as "de-constructionist fun." We yearn for the day when we can describe one another without these misconstructions of both intention and result.

One motto of the reformation was *ecclesia reformata semper reformanda*: The reformed church is ever in need of reformation. This is not "self-contradiction" but good United Methodist tradition. In other words, the reformation is more of a movement than a past event, and more of a process than an accomplishment; the drive for reformation is what faith is all about and needs to continue even if some warn there can only be return to the past not reformation in the present for the future.

Par. 414.3 is only one sentence long and continues beyond the Good News truncation to say, "..., and, as they are led and endowed by the Spirit, to interpret that faith evangelically and prophetically."

We affirm the evangelical and prophetic Spirit of Bishops [Craig](#) and [Rader](#) at Kairos CoMotion. We invite you to follow the links to a fuller report of their comments.

A question we would ask is, how does our living compare with our believing?

There is something to be said for Jesus' comment "by their fruits you shall know them." Jesus' commandments are not to be orthodox but to "love God... love neighbor, as self... love one another... love enemies...."

There are more, but you get the drift. Spong told the "Kairos CoMotion" crowd of 300 that Jesus couldn't have ascended, he would have gone into orbit. His beliefs have become so heretical that no less than 50 Bishops of the Episcopal Church USA disassociated themselves from Spong in a public declaration in 1998. They charged, "In no way do [Spong's theses] represent the doctrine, discipline, or worship of the Episcopal Church-or any other branch of orthodox Christianity."

Several things are disturbing about all this. First, that John Spong is getting such easy entree to United Methodist audiences, even though he has jettisoned the entire substance of classic Christian doctrine. Second, it should be troubling that United Methodist Bishops Craig and Rader joined so freely in the de-constructionist fun in Madison.

Downplaying the "ancient creeds," Bishop Craig said, "We are saying of the tradition and orthodoxy that it is the heresy." She added that she preferred to live in "a tradition that is new every day." (Does that phrase not seem self-contradicting?) Bishop Rader said, "We've been warned not to talk openly about sexuality. We've been warned not to say that the Book of Discipline is sometimes incompatible with Christian teaching. We've been warned not to tell that we are gay or lesbian."

These are disturbing views to hear from two UM bishops. It's troubling because our bishops are charged specifically "To guard, transmit, teach, and proclaim, corporately and individually, the apostolic faith as it is expressed in Scripture and tradition" (Par. 414.3, Discipline). Quite simply, bishops are to guard and teach the church's "tradition," not call it "the heresy."

This brings us United Methodists back to the question of the Muslim evangelist. Does the United Methodist Church really believe what it claims to believe?