

Experiencing God in the Bible: Bible Basics for Progressive Christians

A Discussion Class Led by The Rev. Keith Thompson - First UMC Boulder, Colorado

The nature of the Bible is so widely misunderstood today it's difficult for Progressive Christians to appreciate its crucial place in our lives. Understanding and practicing a few basics can make all the difference.

1. Introduction; and Getting Acquainted (Participants & Leader)

Why this class? The problem is progressive Christian perspectives on the Bible are virtually unknown in our society and thus have had very little public influence. The primary cause is that for over half a century conservative Protestants have been virtually the only Christians promoting their particular perspectives on the Bible. This has resulted in the usurpation, by default, of a rich and diverse range of perspectives on the Bible.

Not only was this usurpation aided by public silence of other Christians but also by common practices of the secular media. One recent example: *Newsweek's* 16-page cover page article, "The Bible: So Misunderstood It's A Sin" (Jan. 2-9, 2015). While highly critical of the conservative Protestant position, it left the impression that this position was the only Christian viewpoint on the Bible. Unfortunately, this happens over and over.

Ironically, many progressive Christians have played right into hands of our conservative brothers and sisters. By not knowing much about our own rich 200-year liberal tradition, we often can speak only about what we don't like about the conservative perspective and not about anything which positively distinguishes our own.

Thus for many we'll be exploring new, challenging answers to the question "Just what is the Bible, anyway?"

Opening Prayer

A. Read the Schedule Sheet and Discuss.

(the link to this sheet is on page 4.16 on Keith's website--as are all other references on weekly handout sheets)

Bring your favorite Bible(s) to each session.

B. Fill in the Q&A Sheet and share our various experiences with the Bible.

(to be handed in to Keith [if o.k.] who will make copies to help him tailor the class for you)

Many of you will have had checkered experiences with the Bible--both turned on and turned off--sometimes to the point of giving up on the possibility of the Bible playing an important role in your faith.

A main goal of this class is to provide you with clear progressive guidelines for how to separate the wheat from the chaff in the Bible, so that reading it regularly provides the possibility of encountering the life-transforming presence of God.

C. Main resources:

Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith* (2003)

Marcus Borg, *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power--And How They Can Be Restored* (2011)

Delwin Brown, *What Does a Progressive Christian Believe?: A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious* (2008)

John Dominic Crossan & Jonathan L. Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* (2001, 2nd edition 2003)

John Dominic Crossan, *The Power of Parable: How Fiction By Jesus Became Fiction About Jesus* (2012)

D. The Basics for this session:

Consider doing something you may have serious doubts will bear fruit. If so, please try it anyway throughout this course and see what happens.

Basic #1 - Trust and act on the promise that it's possible for every Christian to experience the life-transforming presence of God in the Bible. As is the case with all great narratives, rather than just reading them, they read us! However, in this case, since they are the narratives of the Bible--as sacred scripture for Christians--it's God who is reading us. In other words, the Bible becomes a "thin place."

Quote: "'Thin places' are places where these two levels of reality meet or intersect. They are places where the boundary between the two levels becomes very soft, porous, permeable. Thin places are places where the veil momentarily lifts, and we behold God, experience the one in whom we live, all around us and within us."
~Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith--How We Can Be Passionate Believers Today*, p. 156.

At stake--a vital, passionate, healthy faith grounded in scripture. Unfortunately, many mainstream progressive Christians have given up on this promise of our Christian tradition.

So you know where we hope to arrive by the end of this Lent, here is the last Basic (to come in Session 6):

Last Basic - Every Christian is empowered by God (each according to her/his own gifts and graces) to join the living Jesus movement; and given important tasks of love and justice, in order to heal God's world. This leads to fullness of life--a life of purpose & meaning and the joy & peace that passes understanding.

Quote: "The progressive Christian witness will be taken seriously, and make a healing difference, only when and where it is effectively espoused by committed, reflective people who understand that witness, express it compellingly, and enact it together with informed intentionality." ~Delwin Brown, *What Does a Progressive Christian Believe? A Guide for the Searching, the Open, and the Curious*, p. xii.

At stake--the ability of progressive Christians to have a vibrant, powerful impact on the future of Christianity and the world. Presently, we are wielding very little influence on behalf of the common good.

The cumulative total of the Basics will provide
a foundational interpretative framework for progressive Christians for living with the Bible.

E. Assignment: Practice in accessing resources referred to on weekly handout sheets

Log on to the website: www.centristfaithandpolitics.com --

In the Search Box (top right) type in "Borg Speaking" --

Click on "4.6 Borg (2011)" --

This will take you directly to the Quick Look page for Marcus Borg's *Speaking Christian* book --
Read it -- Then click the "Highlights Review" link at the bottom of the page -- Read it

Closing Prayer