

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.

3. A Brief History of Christian Understandings of the Nature of the Bible

Opening Prayer

Basic #4 - Have at least a rudimentary understanding of (1) the major theological paradigm shifts in the 2,000-year Christian tradition and (2) more specifically the major periods of the quest for the historical Jesus in the last two paradigms and (3) more specifically yet the two-source hypothesis, which is the basis for a detailed analysis of the gospels and the quests for the historical Jesus.

Listen as Keith describes a few highlights on the Paradigm Shifts sheet. Q&A.

Share in the total group: Is this information new for you? What's most important to you and why?

The history of empires is crucial for understanding the OT as well as the NT--see video:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ITduTwqtjY

Listen as Keith points out a few highlights on the Quest for the Historical Jesus sheet. Q&A.

Examine one example in a Gospel Parallels Book. What did you discover?

Share one-on-one: Is this information new for you? What are you thinking and feeling about it?

The historical matrix of theological positions is vital--for the historical Jesus see video:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=2i4AxVCnjgU

At stake--A view of the gospels (and the Bible as a whole) that deals honestly and openly with the huge number of differences--if not contradictions--in the texts. For a contrast, take a quick look at something on grocery store magazine racks--Time/Life's "The Life of Jesus: How His Lessons, Miracles, and Devotion Changed the World." **It takes the simplistic view which continues to dominate our culture that it's possible just to harmonize the gospel accounts to come up with an historically accurate account of the historical Jesus.**

Basic #5 - Practice thinking about the nature of the Bible in terms of the progressive theological paradigm, rather than the conservative Christian view ubiquitous in our culture, ironically even among liberal Christians and secularists. For Keith, the best progressive perspective today is John Dominic Crossan's.

In the briefest possible outline, here is Crossan's position:

(1) When you read through the entire Bible you come up with two lists of passages: one where **God is a God of retributive violent justice** and another where **God is a God of distributive non-violent justice**. At a superficial level, it seems these are just running side-by-side like two railroad tracks. Are we just to choose one or both for our position on how the Bible views the character of God?

- (2) On closer inspection, you discover that the two lists are made up of divine radical assertions of non-violent distributive justice that are followed and subverted by reactionary assertions of violent retributive justice. “The deep rhythm of the Christian Bible is a struggle between **a God making us in God’s non-violent image** and **our making God in our own violent image**” (my emphasis). But how do we know for sure that we should choose the first for the real image of God in the Bible?
- (3) Crossan’s answer is that **the norm of the Bible is the historical Jesus**, not vice-versa. The historical Jesus as reconstructed by scholars is our closest vision of God’s divine character, “**what God looks like in sandals.**” This means that, unlike most books, the climax and norm of the Bible comes in the middle; everything before and after the historical Jesus looks forward or back to him.

This material comes from a summary of his newest book, which is quite accessible for everyone--

How to Read the Bible & Still Be a Christian: Struggling With Divine Violence

From Genesis Through Revelation (2015)--

found on his website--here’s the link: www.johndominiccrossan.com

just click on “Books,” go to the last entry and click on the book cover.

At stake--gaining, perhaps for the first time for you, a progressive Christian view of the nature of the Bible that makes you believe it can be a very important foundational experience of God for you on a consistent basis. It also provides you with vital positive biblical content to share with others as well as strong reasons for being critical of conservative viewpoints that are destructive of our faith and world, as will be shown in future sessions.

(You are encouraged to listen to an audio recording of an interview with Crossan about his just released book, -- here’s the link: www.authortalk.audio/harperone. It also provides you with helpful biographical information and a little about his lifetime of work on the historical Jesus, which will be the major focus in the remaining sessions.)

Assignment: Preparation for the Next Session

Once again, you are encouraged to listen/watch the audios/videos linked above.

Also, please make a list of some of your favorite stories about Jesus and bring it to the next session.

Which ones do you consider to be historically true? If not all, how do you tell the difference?

Closing Prayer